

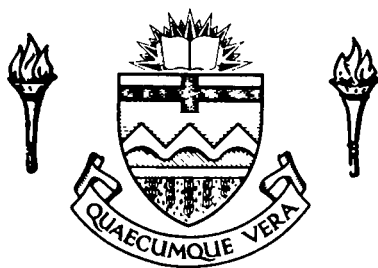
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FROM  
RACHEL

ALAN  
SULLIVAN

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WITH LOVE FROM RACHEL

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QUEER PARTNERS  
THE BROKEN MARRIAGE  
DOUBLE LIVES  
THE GOLDEN FOUNDLING  
WHISPERING LODGE  
ANTIDOTE  
THE CRUCIBLE  
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SANDS OF FORTUNE  
WHAT FOOLS MEN ARE!  
THE OBSTINATE VIRGIN  
THE MONEY SPINNERS

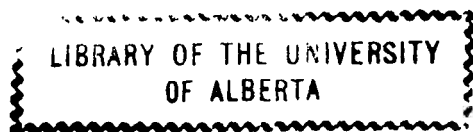
ALAN SULLIVAN

WITH LOVE FROM  
RACHEL

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## WITH LOVE FROM RACHEL

### CHAPTER I

YOUNG WILDING came out of his bungalow, glanced approvingly at the sky, and started down the quarter mile of bush road. He had very blue eyes, and wore oil-stained overalls. It was an earth road, built from the deep ditches on either side, badly rutted in soft weather, and fringed with a few small one-storey wooden houses set in little clearings hacked out of the bush. At the lower end, where one caught the glint of water between palisades of spruce, poplar and white birch, was the Airways base.

From the head of this road at right angles ran another to the end of steel five miles south: it had Hudson's Bay and free-trading stores, a small hotel, a restaurant, some ramshackle dwellings, and, farther down, a wireless station. This road ended not at the backwater where the base lay, but on the main stream of the Athabasca, whose tawny waters coursed rapidly northward towards the Arctic.

There were perhaps five hundred souls in the town of McMurray, and in summer it was not so bad save for the mosquitoes, but in winter, with the land locked tight for months, the place was lonely enough, being too near civilization to be superior

to it, and not far enough north to achieve independence. But McMurray was air-minded. In summer at almost any hour one caught the drone of planes dropping in from Peace River, Great Slave, Edmonton and the western Saskatchewan country, disgorging and loading men of the north with things that pertained to them; while in winter there was less flying, and only those took to the air who could not keep out of it. This life, however, had a taste in it that made up for much.

"Allo, Jack!"

Wilding turned and grinned. She was of middle height, primitively striking, with large, dark, intelligent eyes that held a sort of furtive light. Walking with supple grace, she carried on her shoulders a full packsack, and in one hand a large, square parcel, obviously heavy. He took this from her.

"Gosh! what is it?"

"A new radio set."

"Getting rich, aren't you, Rachel?"

"No, not very rich." She spoke slowly, in a voice strangely deep and quiet.

"How long have you been out this time?"

"Two months."

"Have a good time?"

"It was the same as last year—and enough."

"Didn't get engaged this trip, did you?"

"Jack!"

There was a tone in her voice that could not be mistaken: he flushed a little, then, awkwardly:

"Did your fur sell well?"

"I got four thousand: it wasn't too much. When do we strike Aklavik?"

"Friday with luck: there's quite a lot of mail."

"Many passengers?"

"Only one besides yourself."

"Who?"

"Man called Domert: he's a stranger to me."

"Jack?"

"Well?"

"After we get north a bit, put Tom back with him and take me in the cockpit."

"Nothing doing, my dear: it's against rules, and you know it."

"Jack?"

"Ye-es?"

"Never mind."

She glanced at him oddly several times, saying no more till they reached the water, and he was vividly aware of her nearness. She walked so lightly, firmly, seemingly unconscious of the load on her shoulders: she was hatless, wearing a short khaki skirt, flannel shirt, and moccasins embroidered with a fine pattern in gaily-coloured silk thread. Her hands were strong and shapely, her smooth skin a copper brown, her hair like night. Rachel Bedell was a quarter breed.

At the landing stage he forgot about her: too much to attend to, and began counting the sealed mail sacks for the north. There was a pile of them

on the floating platform, canvas sacks dyed in broad coloured stripes, with strap and locks for sealing. Booster, Wilding's engineer, was squatting on a wing of his plane, watching petrol flow into the wing tank. There was no real filling station at the base: the petrol being kept in steel drums; so you rolled a drum beside the machine, slacked up a plug, put in the suction end of a handworked portable pump, and pumped away. No trouble about that here, but when farther north you had to roll a quarter ton drum down a fifty foot bank of wet clay, it was another matter.

Express stuff lay in a heap. On the bank a plane had been hauled up, and two men were dismounting the Pratt Whitney rotary engine. In a shed sat the agent, a big man with barrel chest, scribbling shipping bills. Behind Wilding's all-metal Junker floated another plane of the same type, and a row of steel drums stood close to the bank. The backwater lay very still, about two hundred yards wide, nearly a mile long, and curving at the south end, with low ground to north and south. It was sheltered from cross winds so that one could land comfortably in any weather.

On the bank also sat a man about forty years of age with an expressionless face, dark close-cut moustache and short, pointed beard. He was well set up, and had narrow-lidded, observant eyes that missed nothing of what was going on, and now rested on Rachel in a curiously boring fashion.

Beside him was a suitcase and two bulging pack-sacks.

Wilding climbed out on the wings, examined the tanks, and nodded. The pumping stopped; the drained hose coiled beside the empty drum; the last of the freight stowed, including Domert's pack-sacks. Now the agent came out, and gave Wilding air reports from Fort Smith lower down on the Slave River. "Aug. 20th. 7.00 a.m. Ground wind light SE ten miles. Ceiling 8,000 feet. Bar 31-21. Visibility good." He nodded, stuffing the sheet in his pocket, and scrambled into the cockpit.

"O.K.," he said, looking at Rachel. "Climb aboard."

Mounting a small steel ladder, she dug a comfortable seat in a pile of first-class mail sacks. Domert sat nearby. The ladder was drawn inside; the agent closed the metal door with a bang, and the double-acting handle clicked. Booster was twisting the handle of the inertia starter to build up compression. Now Wilding switched on, and with a swoop the propeller began to revolve.

When the engine was warm, they moved out. Wilding turned, taxied south, turned again and gradually opened his throttle. The twin pontoons lifted a little, ripping furrows in the backwater, carving an arrowheaded, foaming wake that violated the smooth surface and spread to either shore. The Junker gave a hop—another—a third still longer—and was in the air. They circled once,

making height, and, banking, he saw below two figures coming down the bush road. Opening the little door between cockpit and cabin, he pointed.

"Say, Rachel, there's the best pilot in the north. Like to go back and change over?"

Scott, the man below, looked up and lifted his arm: he, too, was in overalls, but cleaner ones, while Wilding and Booster were exceedingly casual about such details, and the engineer had a habit of putting on buttons with copper wire and pliers. But they stayed on. The two pilots lived in opposite shacks; Scott, married, having the larger. He was senior pilot of the line, a quiet man of great experience, deliberate judgment and iron nerve. In skill there was nothing between the two, but Scott had more years of flying behind him.

He had now been married for two years, and there was a very small son, an embryo pilot. Mary Scott would sit beside his cradle on a winter night when her man was anywhere north of the Arctic Circle, and think—and think. What would flying be like in say sixteen years?

But they were a happy trio—for all the uncertainty. Love—great mutual love—understanding—a good bungalow, perfectly kept. Periodically Mary would invade Wilding's quarters to attack the chaos always to be found there, but the order she established never lasted long. When the two men happened to be at the base together, which was not

often, Wilding would come over, listen to the radio, and talk with Scott in an offhand fashion of strange places and people, of the last break-up, the next freeze-up, and matters that meant much to a pilot of the north.

At such times Mary would sit silent over her work, wondering. She adored her husband, but was not air-minded: she feared for him, and her fancy painted grim pictures. But she spoke of that only to the baby when they were alone.

This morning the sun was so bright, the air so clear and sweet, that she felt unusually happy.

"Jim, who have you got to-day besides the Demings?"

"No one; just those two."

"How far?"

"I don't know yet. Deming wants to see things for himself; unusual for the President of a company, eh?"

"Has he done much flying?"

"Probably not."

"And the daughter?"

"Haven't an idea."

"Will you be at Aklavik?"

"I expect so! after that I can't tell. Looks like a pleasure trip to me."

"If there are no forced landings," said she soberly.

A car came up from McMurray: they stepped aside: it went on to the shed, where a girl got out,

followed by an elderly man with very white hair: he moved briskly and seemed in excellent temper. They stood talking to the agent, who now turned and beckoned:

"Here's your pilot, Mr. Deming, and this is Mrs. Scott."

Deming put out a long, nervous hand. "Glad to meet you both. This is Paula: she insisted on coming, and I'm helpless against superior force. Well, Mrs. Scott, how do you like life at McMurray?"

"It's all right, quite all right." She was appraising the girl, who was tall and slender, very fair, with flaxen hair and china blue eyes: she wore perfectly cut tan boots, jodhpurs, a soft leather wind-break and no hat—the kind of girl who would attract the eye whatever she wore. Now she smiled with a provocative little movement of lip, and said:

"But whatever do you with yourself in winter?"

"That's not so bad as the mosquitoes in June; and there are three of us now," replied Mary contentedly.

"How nice!" Paula nodded, and glanced about, swiftly, a shade critically, taking in what there was to see: she stood very straight and looked somehow remote from this setting of a few simple practical essentials. She looked high-spirited, and as though she had always enjoyed freedom and much of what the world had to offer, which, at first, made Mary feel a shade critical. But, she reflected, her own



background belonged to other days, and it was some time since she had met a girl like this.

"Would you care to see our bungalow?" she asked uncertainly, "you won't be starting for a little while yet."

"I'd love to. And the baby?"

They walked back, the ice broken, talking fast. Paula, discovered Mary, was three years the younger, and had accumulated the customary ideas about the romantic north, but this was no time for dislodging them. She seemed to like the bungalow, surrendering at once to James Scott, junior, who, after an instant of solemn inspection, put out his fat bare arms.

"Mrs. Scott, he's a darling."

"He's a great comfort: I was often lonely before he came."

Paula nodding, studied the room with approval: great white bearskins on the floor; fur robes on the settee; a radio set, big fireplace, easy chairs, odd things from the Arctic—all gave it character, and just now it was flooded with sunshine.

"Neighbours?" she asked.

"Not many, but somehow one doesn't miss them much after a while. There are very few women. Jack, that's Mr. Wilding, another pilot, lives just opposite, and we're very fond of him. He's younger than Jim, and has blue eyes like yours."

"Married too?"

"Oh no," laughed Mary, "he doesn't take life

seriously enough for that; though it's not for lack of opportunity."

"Here?" The tone was incredulous.

"Perhaps further north. He's Jim's best friend, and everyone likes him. We think him very good-looking."

"Where is this paragon now?"

"On his way to Aklavik in the plane that took off just before I met you. One of his girls was a passenger."

"Alone!"

"No," smiled Mary, "there was another, some man, I don't know his name, also Booster, the engineer, in the cockpit with Jack. Passengers aren't allowed there. Where are you going?"

"I haven't an idea. Father—he only took the Airways Presidency last winter—got a sudden notion he ought to see a bit of the north himself, and conditions and all that—he's read it up, but says that's second-hand information—so that's why we're here. I couldn't imagine myself not coming with no one to stay at home for. There's just us two now."

"Just two?"

"My only brother was killed in the war: I never saw him; and my mother died when I was born."

Mary was visioning another kind of loneliness when the roar of an engine sounded up the road.

"That's hard," she said very gently. "Now I think we ought to get back. Jim's ready."

They found Deming talking to the agent, who was counting on much from this inspection: he wanted

better fuelling arrangements, landing grounds cleared for winter use at the various posts, more wireless equipment—a lot of things, while Deming, listening patiently, said he would know better when he returned.

“Well, sir, you can take Scott’s word for it: he knows: he ought to. Eh, Jim?”

Scott, with one of his slow smiles, said nothing, and climbed in. For this trip the agent had supplied folding steel chairs that anchored to the fuselage floor. No freight would be carried, only personal luggage. Roberts, a dour but very efficient Scots engineer, was standing on the starboard wing beside the tilted windscreen: now he got in and closed it. Scott’s face appeared at the little window in the steel partition.

“All ready, sir?”

Deming made an affirmative gesture. This was his first time in the air, a fact he had carefully concealed from his staff, and he felt dubious. But he was plucky and conscientious. Also the first time for Paula. Her eyes were sparkling.

“Father!” she said excitedly, “I can hardly believe——”

The rest was drowned in the clamour of multiple cylinders: now they were over the naked single street of McMurray, with its patches of wooden sidewalks and single rutted road; now over the tarladen sandbanks of the Athabasca, heading down the broad, shining avenue that led to the Arctic. She laughed with sheer ecstasy, and glanced at her

father, whose face seemed unnaturally pale. She put her mouth to his ear.

"We're going to Aklavik, aren't we?"

"Yes," he creaked. "Why?"

"Nothing particular: I just wanted to know."

A hundred miles farther on, Rachel Bedell had begun to feel hostile. Normally she loved flying, and had at least one long trip every season, always with Wilding, when he would often give Booster the stick, open the partition door and talk, or rather shout, and when, on account of engine noise, he could not make her hear, he used a silly sign language that did nearly as well. To-day, however, after making sure that she had first-class mail to sit on, not third-class, which was lumpy with boxes and parcels, he paid her no further attention.

That came from the other passenger, whom she disliked on sight. His eyes would rest on her and stay till she hated the look in them because it made her feel naked. She noted that he was well built, that his body suggested a sinewy strength, that his hands were muscular, though much too white, with well-formed fingers, that he had the manner and assurance of independence, that he was suitably dressed for the north. But this did not make up for the lack of something she could not explain. His name was Domert: he was booked to Aklavik, where she lived. That was all she knew, but the knowledge was unwelcome.

She was a strange girl, a sort of composite creature, as much at home in a city as in the Arctic. To the city, where she dressed as did other women, she brought a sharp, wild tang of wilderness: men and women alike noted the erect body, the free lift of head, her poise and complete unconscious calm. She had excellent taste in clothes, accepted no advances, sold her fur in the best market, enjoyed herself in her own independent fashion, ignoring the interest she roused, then, having enough city, would return to Aklavik, on the delta of the Mackenzie, where she moved an equal amongst men, lay her winter trap lines, and catch fur with the best of them. She seemed happy. She confided in none except Wilding, and in the secret heart of her she loved him.

Such was the woman on whom Domert set his furtive eyes.

"Well," he said suddenly, "I guess we're bound for the same place, Miss—Miss——" he paused interrogatively.

She did not answer. He looked at her more sharply, then seemed amused, and shifted a little closer.

"Maybe I should have been introduced before we started out?"

Rachel surveyed the yellow waters of the Athabasca. Unbroken bush marched along its banks, but farther back on either side lay great swamp lands, forever to be undisturbed, with patches of green scattered amongst a myriad of slimy pools whose viscous surface glinted warm and rotting in the sun, death

traps for any plane. She knew that, but also that every pilot passing this way kept within gliding distance of the main river and safe landing. Now the river was high with flood water, for there had been much rain up south that summer. While she stared at it, she was thinking of Wilding, and whether to ask him to shut this man up, which would have been ridiculous on her part. It was a free country. But something had roused in her the same instinct of repulsion that stirs in a wild animal when it gets the man scent. And there was no fear in her.

"When I travel, I like to talk," said he with a shade of truculence, "especially to a handsome woman. My name is Domert—George Domert, and I'm for Aklavik, like you, so we'll see a lot of each other this winter. Going to trade there: my stuff's coming down on the Distributor. Now it's your turn."

Her eyes were almost blank save for a tiny flick of hot light that came and went with rapidity, the bronze of her cheeks held a deeper colour, and the assumed languor of her attitude mesmerized him. They were five thousand feet up, making a hundred miles an hour, but the Junker sat on the air like a gliding gull, and he felt that they were comfortably alone. Through the six inch square of glass he could see Wilding's back, alert, motionless. No sound from the cabin could reach there.

Leaning forward, he put a hand on Rachel's knee.

"It's going to be a long winter down there: can't we fix something up, you and me?"

For answer she leaned forward and drew up the corner of her skirt, displaying a graceful leg sheathed in brown silk. Instantly the leg vanished, and snatched from its sheath there lay in her lap a skinning knife with wooden handle, pointed blade five inches long, exceeding sharp. She fingered this, still without a word, then stared at him beneath half closed lids, her nostrils dilating a little.

Domert drew back hastily, gaping, bewildered; she took no further notice of him, but the knife lay there till Wilding, switching off, dropped into into a long, circling glide and came down beside the Hudson's Bay store at Chipewyan to deliver mail. Booster opened the door, reached for the steel ladder, and Rachel got out. Then she lit a cigarette, and began to talk Indian to an old man who sat on a log in the sun near shore.

"She's a breed," said Domert to himself; "a damned breed! I knew it right away. Well, the winter's coming."

He gave himself up to anticipations, she having roused in him a craving hungrier than he had known for any white woman, and just because she was a breed. He didn't understand this, but it was often like that, and there it was, unmistakably sharp, and winter in the Arctic with a girl like that, once he had her tamed, would be better than with any white woman he'd ever seen. This vision was so satisfying that he felt almost relieved when another passenger, one for the Lower Mackenzie, got in.

## CHAPTER II

**A**KLAVIK lies on the doorstep of the great gateway to the Arctic, and here the Mackenzie, as though weary and confused after its long, long journey, seems to hesitate, fail to make up its mind, then lose itself in tortuous channels, each of which seeks salt water in its own meaningless fashion. Aklavik is on the largest of these, the land is dead flat, spattered with lagoons, and from the air it looks like a geographical picture puzzle.

To Rachel, however, this place was home. Her shack was well built, comfortable and well furnished: always she brought something back for it from the south, and now, when she viewed it from three thousand feet up, her heart warmed at the sight.

Domert had given no further trouble, there being other passengers; an Oblate Father in rusty black robes, black hat and long black beard from Fort Smith to Fort Simpson; a Hudson's Bay Post manager from Resolution to Arctic Red; a Mounted Police Officer on inspection from Norman to Aklavik. To all intents Domert ceased to exist.

When she got out on the bank opposite her own house, she saw, waiting, a small brown man in a parka and skin boots who stood grinning at her. He had a wide open mouth, small, stringy moustache, and very white teeth.



"'Allo, Pituluk! You all well?"

He nodded, grinning the more.

"Bring my stuff up, will you?"

There were others, all glad to see her; Burstall, doctor and Indian agent; Whitson, sergeant-in-charge at the wireless station; Govett, the Hudson's Bay man, and Louis Dufaut, the independent trader, who looked at her very hard, and said but little. A line of Husky children stood by themselves, silent in rigid attention. Wilding with Booster was mooring the plane against the bank, a task that no pilot deputed. He glanced at the sky, wiping his hands on a piece of waste.

"Tea, Jack?"

"Did I hear a voice from heaven?"

Rachel laughed, and they went up to her shack, to find Pituluk waiting at the door. Wilding stepped round behind, lifted a wooden lid, reached into the cellar beneath, and retrieved a block of clear blue ice. Hacking off a piece, he dropped it into the kettle, and the remainder in a barrel. The stove began to roar.

"Tired, Jack?"

"Too easy a run. What about you?"

"Just a little stiff. You know where the tea is. Thanks, Pit: come back by and by."

The little Husky dumped his load in a corner, grinned again and vanished without sound. Outside they could hear him clucking to Rachel's train dogs.

"He's still faithful, eh?"

She nodded, not thinking about Pituluk; a glow began to pervade the room; Wilding was leaning back, legs stretched out, arms hanging loose. He did look tired.

"I noticed another admirer of yours on the bank, but you didn't seem to," he said lazily.

"Louis?"

"Who else?"

"That's all on one side, Jack, and you know it. Louis ought to know it himself by this time."

Wilding shrugged, and she watched him with an odd expression till the kettle began to sing, and they drank tea without milk in northern fashion. He felt drowsy, and it was good to rest here with the engine roar out of his ears. Presently he would go over to the Signal Station, where there was always a bunk for him, and talk to Whitson, who by this time would have wirelessly McMurray of his arrival.

As to Rachel, he was fond of her, and took her for granted as part of the north. Had anyone suggested that she loved him, he would have laughed. He didn't love anyone himself. She was a good-looking, clever and probably passionate quarter breed, not a native, yet not quite white, and unusual in these latitudes for a breed because she was virtuous. Men did not speak of her with a wink as of some others.

"Jack," said she suddenly, "I've got something for you."

"For me? What have I done now?"

"I hope you'll like it: I made it last winter—for this one; you couldn't use it till then. It took quite a long time, and—well—come here a minute."

He followed to another room: it had a brass bed, pillow and five point Hudson's Bay blankets, dressed skins on floor and walls, a rifle and shot gun on a rack, another smaller stove, silver things and an oval mirror on the dressing table. He looked about with interest.

"Pretty good for Aklavik, Rachel. I'd like some of those patronising Southerners to see this."

"You like it?" She seemed very pleased.

"You bet! Who wouldn't?"

"So do I. What I've made is this." She took from a drawer a Husky artigi, or parka, a sort of outer tunic, and laid it on the bed. "I do hope it fits. It's with love from Rachel."

He gave a whistle. "You made that for me!"

"Why not?" The voice was a little breathless and unsteady: she was gazing at him with hunger in her eyes, but his own, fixed on the parka, were too busy to notice that.

It was wind and weather proof of soft tanned moosehide dressed to a pale, tawny, yellow colour, and had the texture of a glove. It was lined. Around its edge was a band of prime marten, selected skins, deep, glossy and brown, with more marten at the wrists. She had trimmed the hood with wolverine fur that does not gather icicles in bad weather.

It is anti-freeze. The parka came to just above the knees, beautifully cut and stitched, and J.W. had been embroidered on the breast. The thing had a native beauty, and would cause envy in any sourdough.

"Rachel! why did you do this?"

"I—I wanted to. You like it?"

"It's wonderful! By God! you're a trump."

"By God! I love you," said she, and put her arms round his neck. "Kiss me, Jack, kiss me!"

He kissed her, dizzily; her arms were strong; he had not imagined a woman's arms could be so strong. She looked up, lips trembling.

"You didn't know, did you?"

He shook his head: his brain felt like a large bird struggling inside a small cage. This thing wasn't serious! she couldn't mean——! But she had never fooled about with other men, so perhaps she did mean it.

"I didn't want you to know yet; now I can't help it. You're thinking 'she's a quarter breed, and mad.' Well, I am quarter breed, but not mad at all: I could have married a dozen white men: I could marry Louis to-morrow. Jack, say something!"

He fumbled about for words: they wouldn't come. He hated to hurt her—had respect for her—she having earned respect from all: she had the tastes, ambitions and fancies of a white woman—no difference there—yet, unlike most white women,

was ready to be her man's slave, to fight for and follow him all her life, rewarded by much or little, whichever he chose to give, content with that, asking no more. There was something terribly honest, reflected Wilding, in what he had discovered.

A faint droning vibration came from the south, and he recognised the note of a Pratt Whitney engine. She heard it, too, and shook her head.

"Never mind that: speak of you and me. You do love me, just a little?"

"Of course I do, but——"

"No—that'll do. I scared you just now—yes? Well, I'm scared too— isn't it funny?" She put his hand hard against her breast. "Feel how it stops and starts again—is yours like that? Never mind now: I'm all right because you know. The parka, you must try it on."

She laughed a little, suddenly quite gay, smiling while he pulled the thing over his head. "I must play for time," he thought, "and get out of this somehow." He would ask to be transferred to another run, Northern Quebec or the Red Lake country, where the Airways people had a lot of business. That was it—Red Lake—so meantime he'd be damned decent to Rachel and not appear to sidestep, and just hold her off without hurting her. This idea lifted the load from his brain, and he stood in front of the oval mirror admiring himself with her shining face reflected close by.

"Fits like a glove, and you're a wonder. It's too good to use in a plane."

"But that is what it is made for—you in a plane on cold nights when you land on the snow and have to drain the engine. No, it is not too good, and this winter I will make mits to go with it. Will you come back here for supper?"

"I'm due at the Signal Station: ought to be there now."

She looked disappointed, but only gave the parka a little womanly twitch, examining it with a critical eye.

"It is not so bad. Must you go?"

"I'll have a look at the moorings first."

"I'm coming too."

They went out; she spoke to her dogs staked close by, seeming now quite content and calm, and kept looking sideways to see how the new garment hung. Another plane had landed, another group was dispersing from the bank, Scott and Roberts were busy over their own moorings, an elderly man with white hair stood talking to Whitson, while a tall girl in jodhpurs waited at a little distance, looking about with curiosity.

When the two reached her, the young man touched his cap, and she gave one quick glance that seemed to absorb them both in a flash.

"Isn't this Mr. Wilding?"

"Yes, I'm Wilding."

"I thought so."

Two pairs of blue eyes, cool and a shade combative, exchanged a look.

"Well," continued the girl, "won't you introduce me. I'm Paula Deming."

"I've heard of you," he grinned. "This is Rachel Bedell."

Rachel nodded: of a sudden she had changed, lost her gaiety, and become impassive: her dark eyes, which betrayed nothing, were fixed on this traveller; her manner for a moment was that of a native silently scrutinising a newcomer, and she seemed to stand on the far side of a gulf gazing across at them. Then just as suddenly she woke up.

"I'm glad to see you: how long will you be here?"

Paula, a little puzzled, explained: she did not know; it depended on her father.

"But for to-night—yes?"

"I think for a day or two."

"Then you must stay with me, there is no other place—for you."

Paula glanced dubiously at Wilding.

"You're in luck," said he promptly. "The doctor might put you up, or the hospital, but I doubt it. Aklavik is short of rooms for lady visitors. Or," he added, "you might sleep in the plane."

"Of course I'd love that: thanks for the kind thought," she snapped, then, turning to Rachel, "You're very good, and I'd love to come."

"We'll go now: you are tired—yes?"

Wilding, considerably puzzled, strolled over to

the wireless station, where he found the sergeant, an old friend, and very wise in the ways of the north. He and his staff lived in a strongly-built house with an actual furnace for central heat. Fifty yards away was the office with apparatus, batteries and charging engine; beyond rose the wireless masts, light lattice steel painted with aluminium. In the air one saw them from afar.

"Well, what's new down here?"

Whitson shook his head. "Nothing much except yourself; and where in hell did you get that parka?"

"Rachel, she made it."

"Present?"

"Sure."

"Any idea what it's worth?"

"No—what?"

"Say two hundred dollars, or more: there's that much prime marten on it alone."

"Then I wish she hadn't," said Wilding uncomfortably.

"You know what that is?"

"I'm not blind."

"I'd say you were: it's an offer of marriage."

"Get out!"

"It's nothing else." Whitson was quite serious. "Coming from a girl with Indian blood it's just that, and that blood, especially when it's mixed, means trouble somewhere. You can't know just a little about that crowd; you either know a hell of a lot or nothing."



"Then I wish I hadn't taken it."

"In which case quite likely she'd have shot you. Better watch your step."

"Thanks: why won't she marry Louis and have done with it?"

"That's what Louis asks us all twice a week. Meet the other girl?"

"Miss Deming? yes, she's staying with Rachel."

"Who fixed that?"

"Rachel asked her, Lord knows why."

"You've got a lot to learn yet. Rachel will study her—that's why: she's jealous, jealous on sight, wants to keep her away from you. If you'd been out in winter with that girl and watched her setting traps, you'd understand better."

"That's all rot."

"Anything you say goes."

"Should I tell Miss Deming?"

"Not much: she's going there, well, let her. She'll find that Rachel can't do enough for her—that part of it's all right—and she'll be studied all the time. She'll live on the best that Aklavik can dig up, and sleep in Rachel's bed. Try to explain, and she'll laugh in your face. She looks as if she could from what I saw of her. Meet the old man?"

"No."

"He's giving the Airways the once over; I got it by radio. You marry the girl, and you'll be President before you die if you don't crack up. Hungry?"

"What? I could eat wire nails."

"Caribou steak and mountain sheep, and there's a few of last year's potatoes left: pretty soft now, but you can swallow 'em. Ready in half an hour."

"All your dogs?" This from Paula at Rachel's door.

They were beautiful beasts with bronze backs that the sun now touched to gold, cream-coloured bellies, wedge-shaped heads and sharp pointed noses: they leaped joyously on their owner, putting strong feet against her breast while leaning back against their weight she played with the long hair on their throats. As to Paula they were wary, walking round her with light steps, sensitive nostrils expanded, and not too friendly.

"It's only that they don't know you yet: they'll soon get used to you. Now come in and have some tea—we drink a lot of tea in the Arctic."

It was all queer, thought Paula, queer and unexpected, as she drank from a cup that might have come from the Deming china closet. Her eyes explored the place, aware that Rachel was watching with the faintest of smiles. Outside, the delta of the Mackenzie open to Pole! Inside—this!

"You're awfully comfortable here," she ventured.

"Why not?"

There was satisfaction in the tone, but no noticeable pride. Again how queer! Had this been Paula's home, she would have expected and welcomed some

expression of pleasure and interest, but seemingly it was out of place in Aklavik. And what did one talk about here? A thousand questions she wanted to ask.

"This is the first time you have been down north?" said Rachel.

"The very first."

"You like flying?"

"I love it."

"So do I: it's nice to fly over ground you've trapped, and rivers you know. You learn such a lot; and the pilots are all good, very good. That was a pilot with me when I met you."

"Mr. Wilding?"

"Yes, Jack Wilding."

"I heard about him at McMurray."

Rachel's lips took on a faint curve: she seemed secretly amused, and the other girl studied her more closely: not beautiful as are some white women, but very arresting, and full of wild, free grace, attractive to any man with blood in his veins. She made Paula feel a trifle flaccid and colourless in comparison.

"What do you do with yourself all winter?" she asked.

"I am busy all the time: I trap, shoot and hunt with my dogs. What do you do?"

"Nothing half so useful." Paula flushed a little.

"But you won't live here always?"

"No, not always."

There followed an odd moment in which the unspoken thoughts of each, the suppressed curiosity of each, was readable by the other till Rachel gave a low laugh:

"Are we not foolish you and I with so much we have to say and want to know. I am sure that not before have you met a girl just like me, nor I one like you—yet our tongues will not work. Yes, we are very silly."

"You're quite right," said Paula promptly, divesting herself of the last shred of any feeling of superiority.

During the next hour she learned a great deal about the north, about Rachel the hunter, the trapper, but of the inner Rachel, nothing. That remained a mystery. The dark eyes revealed a capacity for passion and suffering. Did that still sleep? Was she content to live thus? Paula could not believe it.

What were the men of Aklavik thinking about. Some purpose lay hidden in this girl, some smooth, almost merciless attribute of purpose that was inescapable. She could rouse any man if she wanted to. Didn't she want to? And if she did find her man, and give herself, what awaited any other woman who thought to step between?

Thus reflected Paula, Paula the modernist, only child of a rich man whose slightly cynical nature did not think it worth while to oppose her whims, which were many. She had always got what she

wanted. Now, on the edge of the Arctic Ocean she grotesquely found herself estimating her own powers against those of this supple quarterbreed. Ridiculous!

Then came to her the image of a young man with fair hair and blue eyes who wore a wonderful fur-bordered coat.

"That Mr. Wilding I met—he is not married?"

"Not married—no—not yet."

"Have you known him long?"

Again the faint suggestion of a smile. "It is now two years."

"Is he as good a pilot as Mr. Scott who brought us here?"

"There is not any difference: if he was not very good, he would not fly in the Arctic."

"And in winter?"

"It is just the same except that the light for flying is short."

Paula could see no similarity, but for the folk of the north it evidently existed.

"Where did he get that beautiful thing he had on?"

"That parka—you like it?"

"Marvellous! I must have one just the same."

"I do not think that is possible—no—not possible."

"You can buy them, can't you?"

"No."

"But who made it?"

"I made it," said Rachel quietly.

"Oh, but you're clever to make such things. Wouldn't you——"

"It was to give, not to sell. I will not make any more."

"You—you gave him that!"

"Why not? It will keep him warm when the freeze-up comes."

Paula bit her lip: she was out of her depth, but, now had her first glimpse of the real and secret Rachel.

"How long did it take?" she hazarded.

"All the free time I had last winter: the embroidery is silk, the seams are silk, and it is not easy to sew moosehide, though it is soft. You do that with a needle with three corners. The marten fur is the best I trapped. But that is nothing."

"I think it's a great deal; I wonder he'd take such a valuable thing."

Rachel did not answer: she looked contented, a shade possessive, independent, and happy with her private thoughts: she glanced up as though deliberating whether to impart these to her visitor, and at this something awoke in Paula. She saw it all now. Her modernist mind was surprised that she had not seen it before. Wilding was Rachel's lover! At first she felt indignant, then, without reason, vexed.

"Are you going to marry him?" she asked abruptly.

"I think so," the voice was level, but held a

fibre of feeling. "I will know soon. Also I will not marry anyone else. I am more than three quarters white, and that is enough for any man down north. You could not understand that yet—but you will."

"I hope you'll be very happy."

This sounded thin, and she knew it, but for some strange cause did not hope so at all, and wanted a straight talk with that blue-eyed pilot, and to stop him making a fool of himself. This sleek brown girl calling herself Mrs. John Wilding! Preposterous. And what a simpleton the man must be.

"Thank you," said Rachel. "We will have supper in one hour."

"Can't I help?"

"No, I thank you, Pituluk is coming to help. He is very good."

"Then I'll have a walk."

"But do not touch one of the dogs."

"Trust me for that," nodded Paula, and went out.

The Mackenzie lay unwrinkled between its clay banks; an Eskimo schooner was moored close to shore with brown-faced children in diminutive parkas on its cabin roof; lines of dogs were staked out in parallel rows; the wireless masts lifted slender frames into the still air; voices sounded in the distance; two Oblate Fathers in weathered soutanes and battered hats walked swiftly towards a large building covered with sheet iron—their school house; a wedge of grey geese honked far over head.

Paula settled silently on a stranded log. She was nearly two thousand miles from McMurray.

"Well," said a voice at her elbow, "what do you make of the metropolis?" It was Wilding, in Rachel's parka: he extended a cigarette case. "Take one—good for mosquitoes."

"Thanks. As to the metropolis, I don't know yet."

"Comfortable with Rachel?"

"Oh, very! It was a bit of a surprise."

"Why surprised?"

"One hardly expected to find——"

"That's what they all say, if they don't know better," he put in acidly. "They come here prepared to make allowances, which aren't needed."

"Why so protective of Aklavik?"

"That isn't needed either, especially by Rachel. You like her?"

"She's a most unusual person, that is to me—with your kind permission, thank you."

Wilding chuckled. "And nothing else?"

"Also very generous."

"So far so good. Why not give us the rest of it?"

"The rest of what?"

"You know perfectly well."

"Aren't you wandering a bit?"

"There's no place to wander here without getting wet, unless one takes to the air. We don't seem to be getting very far, do we?"



At this she laughed. The blue eyes in the smooth tanned face looked bluer than ever, and expressed a sort of restless daring. He had a mop of fair hair: his body, of middle height, was graceful and loose-jointed.

"Then let's start over again," said she. "I saw Mrs. Scott at McMurray; so nice; I liked her."

"Mary's a Trojan: it's not much fun being a pilot's wife—in winter, anyway. Pilots shouldn't have wives at all."

"You interest me. Why?"

"Ask Mary: she won't agree with me, but ask her. She bagged a crack pilot too. You're all right with him. I don't like women passengers as a rule; they squeak too much. I don't hear 'em, but see 'em, and it puts me off."

"Did Rachel squeak?" she asked wickedly.

"Rachel's different: only one Rachel hereabouts."

"Ye-es, I admit that."

"So we're back at Rachel again?"

"So it seems. Well, I congratulate you."

"On what?" he asked coolly.

"The parka, of course."

Wilding laughed: he had worried for a while over Whitson's warning, then put it aside as absurd. The gift was awkward, but he knew that he could not decline without deep offence, so the next time he was in Edmonton he would buy the girl something decent in return, then avoid the Aklavik run for a few months, and let the matter take care of

itself. But in the meantime he did not propose to discuss Rachel with anyone else.

"It is rather nice," he agreed, "and useful too. When a woman of the north gives anything, she's apt to give handsomely, and make it herself. Different up south."

Paula tossed away her cigarette. "Is that the voice of experience?"

"No," he said sadly, "no time yet for experience. I'm only twenty-six."

"While I'm a mere twenty."

"A most interesting age. Where does Miss Deming go from here?"

"Ask father."

"Is this a proposal on the Mackenzie delta?"

"My instincts are not those of a poacher, Mr. Wilding. Where do you go?"

"Eh? Oh! Bully for you. I'm for Great Bear Lake."

"Any more lady friends there?"

"Not that I remember, but I can probably find one."

"You seem to have that gift."

"Thanks: I always try to do what my tender age permits. Well, we're due at Rachel's: better get moving."

"Are you due there?"

"Oddly enough, yes: she's throwing a party to introduce you and your august parent to the aristocracy of Aklavik, and is broad-minded

enough to ask me and Scott. Can't you see I've shaved?"

"Congratulations: but she didn't say anything about that to me; she just said 'supper'."

"That's her way: it'll be a supper all right. Come along, girl."

"Aren't you a shade familiar?" said she.

"No—just lack of social experience. I'll get over it—in time."

"Mr. Wilding!"

"Paula!"

"Who said you could call me Paula?" she stut-tered indignantly.

"It's the way of the north," he grinned. "Hustle up, and don't back chat with a pilot. It isn't done."

To her private astonishment, she did hustle.

An interesting supper. Rachel, who was equally amenable to all creeds, had asked the Oblate, Father Ladine, a black-bearded, secular priest of the Order whose motto is poverty, chastity and obedience: he was steward for the Oblate school for Eskimo children and each winter killed three hundred caribou on the foothills of the Rockies, packing them by dog-team to Aklavik for ice storage. There was Matthews, the Anglican parson, a brown, sinewy man lately from Ungava: Scott, the pilot, who said very little; Whitson, the Staff Sergeant at the Wireless Station, and Bur-stall, the doctor, who was also Government Agent.

Deming regarded these people with increasing respect. They knew their jobs, and did them. No complaints. They were well informed, all having radio sets. If they missed the outer world, they did not show it; there was no uncertainty as to the future, and they seemed to have escaped as much as they missed. Ladine was pure French from the city of Tours, and had the liquid tongue of Touraine: Matthews full of dry humour, and Whitson charged with sagacity. All had the unconscious dignity of those who live close to nature.

Pituluk, his broad face grinning, helped in the outer kitchen, and Paula could see his teeth flash. The joint was a leg of mountain sheep, killed and frozen six months previously; it tasted sweet and nutty. They had wild fruit, new made cake and perfect coffee.

The sun set about eleven, but there was little diminution of light. Talk went on. Paula noticed the deliberateness of this talk, very good-natured and measured: a man had time to say his say, then often a little pause before the next came in, and what they said they knew. No doubt about that. So different from everything she had expected, and several times she saw Scott glance curiously from Wilding to Rachel.

In the middle of it a message was brought to Deming from the night operator on duty. He was wanted back in Vancouver at the earliest possible moment. He handed it to Paula, shrugging.

"Well, my dear, that's flat. We'll have to go."

"I don't want to go—yet."

"Nor I; but this is important. You can have another longer trip next year. I'm sorry—but——"

She said nothing more at the moment, but later when he started off with Burstall, at whose house he was sleeping, she touched his arm and steered him towards the river bank. The sun was just below the horizon, floating in a lake of fire where dawn stood on tiptoe: a light glowed in Pituluk's schooner; voices dwindled near the signal station; two 'planes rested lightly a hundred feet apart; some Husky dogs were talking further down-river. It was all strange and impressive.

"Dad—about to-morrow—no—to-day? Is Mr. Scott going to fly us back?"

"Naturally: he's detailed for that duty."

"Need he?"

"Why need he?"

"I want him to change and go to Bear Lake instead."

"But why change?"

"Does it make any real difference which pilot does which?"

"I don't know; their orders come from the agent, not me."

"But you could instruct the agent."

"Why on earth should I?"

"Because, well, I want him to: I want a talk with Mr. Wilding."

"I begin to see a light," chuckled Deming.

"Dad, don't be silly. I'm not interested in that way, but if we don't have that talk he'll probably do something very foolish."

Deming stroked his chin. "And if you do, perhaps you will."

"Certainly not: I've no sentimental inclination whatever, but something has to be said, and while he wouldn't take it from an older person, he might from me. I'm frightfully serious about this, really."

She looked serious, and her father felt a little helpless. In recent years he had begun to capitulate more and more weakly when she came to him with that rather tight expression on the small face with its tilted nose and honest eyes. She was headstrong, and he knew it, but knew also that her impulses were generally quite unselfish, which gave him a vague consolation for surrendering when he knew he shouldn't. And he loved her dearly.

"Well, I'll see what I can do."

"You're a darling. I knew you would, and, well, thanks."

She kissed him and left him. Halfway back she met Wilding who put out his hand.

"*Au revoir!* we may meet again, somewhere. Nice party, wasn't it?"

"Awfully nice; I liked all of it."

"Well, you've got all the time you want, but I'm for a spot of sleep—taking off in four hours."

"At six?"

"More or less: must gas up first."

"We won't be ready then, not nearly."

"Who won't?"

"Father and I."

"But you're not going to Bear Lake."

"Neither are you," said she. "*Au revoir.*"

### CHAPTER III

SCOTT was on the bank early, waiting a signal from Roberts who straddled a wing of the 'plane beside the tank inlet while Pituluk worked the pump. A cool morning with little twisting wreaths of mist clinging to the river's face, but there promised good flying weather.

Roberts lifted a hand, and just then Wilding lounged up, looking sleepy.

"Morning, Jim."

"Morning, pilot. That'll do, Pit, stop pumping, she's full."

"Say, what's struck Sturt?" Sturt was agent at McMurray, and settled routes for all the 'planes.

"Nothing that I know of."

"Well, we switch: you're to do Bear Lake, Coronation Gulf and the rest of it: I'm to take the Demings back to McMurray, perhaps Edmonton. Word's just come through."

"Why this thusness?"

"Damned if I know. Didn't bump the old man on the way down, did you?"

"Nary a bump; flattest trip I've made this year."

"Well, something's up. That Deming girl knew."

"Knew what?"

"We were going to switch: she told me so four hours ago."



"Is that fatal gift of yours at work again?"

"Don't be an ass! We strike sparks every time we meet. She needs bossing."

"Did Sturt say nothing else?"

"No—just that."

"Okay, but I'm betting your number is up. Hi! Roberts, you and Booster can get those mail-sacks out of Mr. Wilding's 'plane into mine. If there's anything ready for up south put it into his; we're leaving at once."

Roberts, absorbing this conversation with similar conclusions, climbed down and transferred the mail, when Pituluk, who had also been listening and missed nothing, came up with his usual all-embracing grin: what he had overheard suited him exactly.

"Mr. Scott, you go Coronation now?"

"Yes, why?"

"My brother Isaluk—he very sick there now long time, maybe he die. You know Isaluk—fine man—fine hunter."

"No, Pit, I don't. What's the matter with him?"

"All rotten inside—last night I dream he die on island in lake, you there too and other man with long black beard. Then I wake up. Now you take him hospital Fort Smith and maybe he no die, then you tell me next time how much money that cost. Isaluk—he got no money—me—I got plenty."

"All right, Pit, I'll do what I can. Any passengers for Great Bear, Jack?"

"Nope, nothing but mail."

"What's the name of that fellow who came down with you?"

Wilding pointed to a white triangle not far off. "Domert. He's in that wedge tent; told me he was going to trade here and his stuff is coming in with the Distributor, but I'm wondering what kind of trade he's really after. From something Rachel said I think he tried to get fresh and found his mistake—that was on the way down—but I saw nothing myself."

"He would, with her. I've seen him before sometime."

"Where?"

"Trying to think: it'll come: Rachel did herself proud last night, eh?"

"She's all right."

"Say, Jack, I heard about that parka from Whitson: he says you're on thin ice, my son. Those breed girls aren't so easy to handle."

"The ice will carry me," laughed Wilding. "Oh yes, I know what you're driving at, but there's nothing else between us—just that parka—and I don't want to hurt her any more than you do. I wonder what she's getting out of that Deming 'girl. It was curious to see them together."

"Probably more than is being got out of her," said Scott cryptically. "Well, it's your own affair."

I take it she's making the Deming girl's breakfast just now."

This was quite right, and a curling wreath of grey smoke drifted lazily over Rachel's cabin. She was busy and very happy; already she had glanced into her own room and seen the rather mutinous little face on her own pillow very sound asleep: she was pleased with the success of her party, felt quite fresh, and reflected contentedly that Deming and his daughter would soon be off with Scott. Wilding had not been mentioned again after he left them, this girl did not seem at all interested, and a great fear had been lifted from Rachel's heart.

She went to the door, saw the two pilots, and called.

"Coffee for you boys! It's all ready, come along."

Scott winked at the younger man and they walked over. Rachel's coffee was notable, and they sat sipping when Wilding said:

"Where's your visitor, Rachel?"

"Asleep. She's tired, and there's no hurry."

"After one of those wild Aklavik nights, eh? Well, I think you had better wake her up, we've got to start in an hour. Her father told me to be ready. The old boy is restless: he's seen enough of your northern metropolis and is all for pushing off, pronto."

"Told you to be ready? Why you?"

"Certainly me, I'm taking them back to McMurray. The old man's got a wire that he's either going to make or lose a million, I don't know which, he didn't think it necessary to tell me. Jim's going on to Bear Lake instead."

"But they started with you, Jim," said she puzzled.

"Yes, but evidently don't like my style of flying," he chuckled, "or else it's my face—I think it's the face—and the President of the Company has picked out a better-looking pilot."

She glanced sharply at Wilding, gave a short, constrained laugh, and turned away for a moment. Her expression had changed, and Wilding, noting this, kicked Scott's ankle hard.

"Shut up," he hissed, then aloud, "we'll probably make it in two days, when I can discard society manners, and revert to a natural condition. Anything you want up south, Rachel?"

She shook her head. Scott wished to leave them alone for a moment, but Wilding stopped him with a look. It was safer thus. Rachel, still wearing that strange expression, knocked at the bedroom door and they heard a long, drowsy yawn.

"Please," she said, "you must get up now: you will leave quite soon. I didn't know till a minute ago, I'm so sorry."

The bed creaked. They heard light steps, the door opened and Paula, flushed to rosiness, put her head out, then with an exclamation withdrew. At

this juncture Wilding sent Scott a nod, got an understanding wink in return, and they left together. Rachel watched them go, her eyes inscrutable, and ten minutes later was pouring coffee for Paula. Her face was now quite calm, but her heart felt dead.

"You slept well?"

"Like a top—the minute I put my head down. It seemed just a few minutes more—and you?"

"I always sleep—one does in the north—always."

"What were those two doing here?"

"Just came in for coffee—all the pilots do it: and I'm glad: they say mine is the best in the Arctic Circle."

"There's nothing better out of it," smiled the other girl, "and, oh! Rachel, I didn't tell you that my father's plans have altered suddenly, and Mr. Wilding is flying us up south. I meant to speak of it last night, but forgot."

"Yes, I have just heard." The voice was quite composed. "Why did you change pilots?"

"Mr. Scott wanted to go to Bear Lake, I believe," said Paula, her eyes in her cup. "Does it make any difference, really—to anyone?"

"Why should it?" asked Rachel in an odd tone; "the pilots are always changing about. Will you come back to Aklavik again?"

"I wonder: I'd like to."

"And stay with me? I think perhaps you cannot understand what it means to have you here."

Paula had a throb of contrition: she felt mean, petty, and confessed that these tactics of hers, possible only on account of her position, were not entirely admirable. She wasn't playing fair with this quarter-breed girl of such spontaneous kindness: but, she now argued, it wasn't as though she herself were in love with Wilding. And, anyway, she would never see Aklavik again.

"I'd like to stay very much if I do come."

When she said this, and it sounded quite genuine, a strange thing happened. Rachel, lifting her head, looked at her as though she were a long way off, her eyes were almost blank, she seemed to be peering into the future as at something that moved behind, far behind Paula, something vital and distinct that she perceived and registered in a very definite fashion. Her eyes were cloudy with thought, and this momentary intermission had a quality of tenseness. Of a sudden she was again quite natural.

"You will come back, I know that now. I'm quite sure."

"Why, how can anyone know? I don't."

"I cannot say, there is nothing one can explain, but it is like that very often, and the North gets you. There is not much here, but it is strong and it calls—always calls one to come back. If you do not hear it you are deaf. But you will hear."

"Theatrical!" reflected Paula and smiled, while she tried to express her thanks, and packed her suitcase, listening to the roar of Scott's Junker as

he took off for Great Bear Lake; then Pituluk carried the case to the river bank, where her father was waiting with the usual group that always gathers for the arrival or departure of a machine. She climbed in and waved to Rachel through the small sliding window, thinking how lonely that little knot of people looked under these vast, empty skies—a few humans who would presently fade out of sight for ever. But she knew that she would never quite forget them.

Rachel waved back, nodding gravely, one hand grasping the leash of the tawny leader of her team, her eyes not on Paula, but gazing earnestly at a man's head visible in the cockpit, and there was tragedy in those eyes. As the 'plane began to move like a huge mechanical silver beetle over the smooth water, the dog growled, and she turned sharply.

"Well," said Domert who stood close by, "now we can settle down and make friends." The voice was very cool and confident.

Rachel hardly saw him: at that moment Domert did not matter, nothing mattered except that the 'plane was already circling overhead to make height, and banking; then Wilding waved his hand, flattened out and streaked south-west away from the lagoon-scattered delta on a line for Fort Macpherson. The machine dimmed to a speck, its note diminished to a faint buzz and died, and of a sudden Aklavik seemed empty. For her it was empty: she felt suddenly tired, old, and inexpressibly lonely.

"Nice dog, that," commented Domert persistently, eyeing the leader with approval. "I'm trying to pick up a good team myself, but they seem scarce.

"If I let go he won't be so nice," she snapped, and made for her cabin. There she found Pituluk splitting wood; he was exceedingly strong and used the axe as though it were a toy. An idea came as she watched him.

"Pit," said she, "you take the dogs for a long run—you know—they're too fat. Drive them as hard as you like."

The little Husky beamed: he felt idolatrous about Rachel, and would die for her if need be: most of the natives felt the same in the Delta and along the south coast of the Beaufort Sea, and on her side she accepted it in just the right way with a paucity of words, constant kindness, and always a good price for the fur they brought in. They liked to deal with her. So in a few moments Pituluk had plunged off shouting with laughter, jerked along in dislocating tow of five yellow bundles of living steel to whom his weight was nothing. Burstall was back at the hospital busy over patients white and native, Whitson already asleep after his night's vigil at the key. There were no loungers in front of the Hudson's Bay or Northern Traders stores, no boats on the river. Aklavik looked dead and deserted, dipped in an autumnal haze that lay lightly on the level land. It spoke of colder weather not far distant.

Rachel felt numb in body and spirit. She had



tried so hard to do the right thing, the thing that she knew her visitor would not have done for her under similar circumstances. White people were never like that to a breed, whether man or woman. She had wanted Paula to see how happy she was, and she would be happy now had Paula not come to Aklavik. Paula had created a contrast in a thousand little touches and ways of natural manners and gesture: everything she did or said had sharpened the difference between them, so that Wilding must certainly have noticed it and begun to think hard as he had not thought before. That was it; now he would be remembering and thinking it all over, and asking himself questions, and this was why there had been no moment alone with him since his arms went round her neck and he said that of course he loved her.

She loved him deeply, loved him the more hungrily because she had never caught in his eyes the look that she found in those of so many other white men she had met, the look that showed in Domert's on the journey down North. White men, she had long since realised, were apt to regard any woman with native blood as theirs if they wanted her, and were surprised if they found it otherwise. And so in that way she had loathed her native blood, though in others she was proud of it. Now because she loved, she feared that she was too white to be native, too native to be considered white. That hurt like hell.

A knock at the door. "Yes, come in."

It was Domert who came in: he nodded affably and stood for a moment examining his surroundings with approval, then he sat down, hat between his knees, still looking about, still nodding.

"Well," she said, "what is it? I didn't ask you here."

"That's right, you didn't. It's nothing much, except I guess I was too fresh on the way down. I didn't mean anything, so forget it."

"I have forgotten."

"That's right. Now look here—we'll be locked up tight for the winter pretty soon, and I want things to go smoothly between you and me. There's no reason why they shouldn't, and I'm all right when you know me."

"They will," said she, searching the man's face, "people here will see to that."

She said this with an air of confidence, but something inside her was signalling not to forget that she, partly native, was talking to a white man. Always there would remain this tragic difference, so instantly she became very alert, every sense vividly alive. She had never misread what a man who looked at her hard really wanted, and made no mistake now.

"That's all right for me too," answered Domert promptly, "just the way I like it. Now there's this. Like everyone else I'm here to make money. I'll buy fur from anyone, buy your fur, or I'll go partners, whichever you like. I've got money though perhaps

I don't look it—enough money to do big business. You and I together could make these other traders tired."

"I sell my fur in Edmonton," said she coldly, "and don't want a partner."

"Well, I'll give Edmonton prices."

Rachel stood up, wishing that Pituluk were not away with the dogs, and realising that Domert had weighed his chances by coming now.

"I think you had better go. This is my house—please go away."

Domert also stood: he came a little nearer and his eyes seemed to change colour.

"Look here," he persisted, while a dull flush grew in his cheeks, "that's only part of it and not the most important either—I guess you know what's behind it. What I really came for is something you've certainly heard before. I want a woman to live with in the North, and the minute I saw you your number went up. I'm not married. Damn it, I'll go further than the rest of 'em, I'll marry you if you like. I'm broad-minded—I don't care who your grandmother was—that makes no——"

He jumped aside in time to avoid a brass bowl that whirled past his head and crashed through the window. Rachel's eyes were flashing, her breast stormed, she looked superb in fury.

"Get out," she hissed. "Out—out."

Such was her transformation that he backed away clumsily, unwilling admiration in his face. He wanted

her more than ever. Now of a sudden the door opened and another man stepped in; short, broad, with round wide blue-black eyes and dark hair. He stared at them, then with quick suspicion at Domert. His strong fingers were curving stiffly.

"Say, what's up here, eh? This fellow he make trouble?"

"Oh, Louis, I am——"

Rachel cut off the rest. "Be careful," warned the inner voice. "Be careful. The white man asked you to marry him, that's no insult to a breed."

Listening to this, she drooped a little, becoming very weary of it all and almost weak. The fury passed into a kind of despair, whilst Domert, shrewdly calculating the real reason for this change, regarded with cool interest the newcomer, who was looking hard at him, jaw projecting full of hot Gaelic suspicion.

"Can I do anythings, Rachel? You tell me right now."

"No, Louis, that's all right: I guess I lost my temper over nothing. This is Mr. Domert, we came down together."

"Pleased to meet you." Louis' tone was hostile.

"See you later," said Domert, and gave a nod which included them both as he went out. Louis put his hands on the girl's shoulders, looking at her close and lovingly.

"Say, Rachel, what's that fellow doing here?"

"I—I didn't ask him in. He says he wants to

buy fur this winter, my fur too. I guess he's got money—he talks as if he had. It's all right, Louis; don't you say anything to him, please don't."

"Why not tell me the rest of it?" he asked frowning.

"There isn't any; forget it. Sit down for awhile. I'm glad to see you." She talked quickly, nervously, determined that he should take no hand in this affair. It would only make more trouble. Two white men quarrelling over a quarter-breed girl, and her name on every lip. She dreaded that, could imagine what they would say, and dreaded even more what the white women would say and what they would think—no mercy to be expected there. It meant the loss of all she had worked so hard and so long to achieve.

"For me, I don't like it," said Louis warmly, "damned if I do, and we don't want any more traders here either. You—the Northern Traders, the Hudson's Bay and myself—*mon Dieu!* isn't that enough for Aklavik? Has he got any licence?"

"I don't know—he must have—he wouldn't dare trade without it. Louis, please forget it."

Her distress was so obvious that he relented: Domert could be looked after later—he would attend to that himself, and meantime he was excessively glad to see Rachel back. He loved her very much, admired her enormously, and was a trifle afraid of her. So concentrated had he become that the thought of Wilding did not even enter his mind.

In eight years' steady trading at Aklavik he had done well, was on good terms with his rivals and generally liked. He knew the delta and coast and went to Herschell Island every year to attend the great meeting of traders, trappers and hunters which takes place on that lonely soil-sprinkled dome of ice in the Beaufort Sea.

And Rachel knew that he loved her. She was very fond of him, trusted him, but nothing more.

"Had a good trip?" he said, with the old faithful expression in his eyes.

"Yes, very. I saw the Calgary Stampede and spent a lot more money than I should. But I wouldn't like to live there, and was glad to come back north. What's happened here in the last two months?"

"Nothing much, the measles pretty bad with those Louchoux on the Peel River, and they're going to move the Mission school from Shingle Point to Aklavik. She's pretty near blown away that school last winter. Why," he added curiously, "don't you want to live up in Calgary? that's one fine place."

"I just don't, the people stare too much, they all look worried, and there aren't any trees—just horses and grass in that country. No, I like Aklavik much better."

"That wouldn't be because one certain Louis Dufaut lives here?" he suggested hopefully.

"Now, Louis," she shook her head in warning, "you know what I said?"

"Yes, I know that all right, but, by Gar! I hear it now too often. How long you go on like this?—you tell me."

"I can't, I don't know, but it's all just the same."

He leaned forward, brow wrinkling, profoundly earnest. "See here, *chérie*—you go on like this one, two, three years, then by and by pretty soon you begin to dry up like one old blueberry—you ain't the same any more—you don't walk straight like now—your eyes they don't shine any more—no one look at you twice, or maybe three times like now. Too bad! Myself, I don't like that. I got I guess twenty thousand dollars in Edmonton, and like to quit trading and look after you. That's what I want. This house I guess she's all right, but by Gar, you marry me and we have better bigger house up south. We get married, then go to Trois Rivières, near Montreal, and meet my *famille*, and I guess they like you very much right away. Now what's the matter with that?"

He concluded this appeal by tapping her knee very gently with a broad, strong, well-tended hand, looking up at her with the honest, loyal eyes of a great black-haired dog.

She gave him a sad little smile, hating to hurt him and longing that she might feel differently about him. A white man's wife—home—children who would have only one-eighth of native blood instead of a quarter! Reason prompted surrender, but deeper than reason held her fast, and Wilding

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had said that of course he loved her. Still she hesitated, little dreaming how grave was the issue of that moment, then shook her head in gentle finality.

"Can't we just be friends, Louis, good friends, like always? It's going to be a long, cold winter here in Aklavik, and we'll see a lot of each other—we might go out on my trap lines together. I don't want you to be like this every time I see you, and it's hard to say the same thing so often—and you mustn't make trouble with that man over me; this place is too small—he can't do any real harm and I can take care of myself. Now I've brought in a new radio, will you fix it up? And bring the doctor and Joe Whitson round to-night for supper. We'll get all Europe on that machine."

He made an eloquent gesture: so often was it like this; but failure only made him the more determined, and if time and again she gave him a sense of hopelessness he had to admire the way she did it. Now he wondered if this winter his luck would change enough for him to go up south with her next summer, and do some things together, really discover each other, and find ultimate happiness a long way from Aklavik.

At this point he had a sudden disconcerting idea,—was she in love with some other man up south—one he had never seen or heard of?

"All right, I'll fix that machine, but by Gar! first you tell me one thing. Some other man—who never come to Aklavik—some man you meet up



south—I never see him at all—he ask you to marry him and you think maybe yes?”

“Louis,” said she, “I hardly spoke to a man while I was away and no one of them asked me to marry him.”

“Then that’s all right and I wait just one little while longer.” He brightened at once, busying himself over the radio set. “She’s one fine machine, eh? How much you pay?”

“Two hundred dollars: it’s the best I could get—with a lot of spare batteries.”

“You hear lot on this—maybe Paris?”

“Yes, easily, and the Empire short wave broadcast from London.”

“That’s one long way off, but some things right here in Aklavik, you don’t hear at all. That’s funny—only two hundred yards maybe.”

“What do you mean, Louis?”

“Jim Scott he change with Jack Wilding, you know. Jim he start for Bear Lake, and Jack he go to McMurray.”

“Yes, I know, Miss Deming told me.”

“But why they change? Maybe you know that too—I guess not.”

“It doesn’t matter, does it?”

“Last night—no, I guess early this morning—that man Deming and his girl they talk not far from my store. I hear it all. She say she doesn’t want to fly back with Jim. Her father ask why not, and she say she want one long talk, pretty damn serious

talk with Jack. It's very important. He's going to do some fool thing bad for him and she stop it. Why she want to stop it, I don't know—not my affaire. I guess the old man don't like that too much, but she is very—what you call *impressée*—you know, she stick right for that—so presently he say he will fix it. Then she start back here and he go to Signal Station. I guess this pretty important girl to switch these pilots round like that, eh?”

“Was that all?” said Rachel, shakily.

“Yes, and that's why she fly back with Jack this morning. Pretty rich girl, eh, to talk like that? I guess most every time she gets what she wants. Well, so long.”

## CHAPTER IV

THE Demings, at Wilding's suggestion, had cotton in their ears, so the roar of the Pratt-Whitney's cylinders was muffled to a dead rumble—where Paula sat comfortably wedged in between first-class mail sacks on her way south to the base. Deming, tired from loss of sleep, was dozing peacefully, but his daughter was very wide-awake and exceedingly self-occupied.

It had been a strange night, she thought, with hardly a break between one day and the next, affording a brief glimpse of an unusual community, so brief that she wondered whether it was quite real. It was like journeying through space, finding unexpectedly and, as though floating in space, a group of individuals who lived independently of the rest of the world, their way of thinking more directly practical than that of other people. She had expected them to be, somehow, different, but now it seemed that the only difference lay in the fact that they had more natural dignity—they were unworried, self-contained, and very understanding. She liked them all tremendously. Now she was flitting through space again, back towards the activities one knew so well, with Aklavik a hundred miles more distant every hour, yet something from this wilderness was beginning to reach her.

They had stopped at Fort Macpherson and were flying up the Mackenzie towards Arctic Red River. The great stream beneath them was a mile wide with gravel and sand bars projecting their sluggish length from its receding and yellowish waters, and along either shore was no sign of human habitation for league after league. Spruce and poplar marched to its high banks unbroken, their trunks scored and grooved with the grinding passage of spring ice when the Mackenzie burst its normal boundaries, and lesser rivers wound their way from low, swampy lands on either side, sliding with languid curves into the parent flood. It was all vast, empty, hypnotic; it both silenced and attracted; it established a new sense of personal proportion in which the individual contracted to a tiny fraction of something formless, inanimate and everlasting, yet infinitely more potent than oneself.

Paula was yielding to this, but at the same time felt something like a crusader; she had found a mission in this strange country, so at Arctic Red she came to a decision, and awoke her father.

"Dad, I want to change places with Booster."

"Eh, what's all that?"

"I want to sit in the cockpit with Mr. Wilding."

"No, no, it's out of the question—it's against the rules—you mustn't interfere with the pilot."

"Then the rules ought to be changed on occasions. Dad?"

"I've said all I propose to say."

"But, please—I want to learn something: it isn't just curiosity. There's no fun for me sitting here, and I'm wasting time. I've got to see how the thing is done, and study the dashboard. There're a lot more things than on a car. Aren't you the President of this Company, and don't you want me to be intelligent?"

"I believe so, and Presidents don't celebrate their first tour of inspection by breaking rules, also you've every opportunity of being intelligent on the ground. Try and be merely sensible till then."

"Dad, you're not aware, are you, that by this time next year I'll be flying a machine of my own, and have a pilot's certificate."

"I certainly am not: it'll be another kind of certificate if you go on like this."

"But I will. I'll buy it with my own money and moor it in English Bay with the Airways planes and one of your pilots will teach me in his own time. I've got it all thought out."

Deming, perceiving the inevitable, and also being exceedingly weary, sighed deeply, and she knew that she had won.

Two hours later, Wilding sent an oblique glance where she sat on his right. Not pretty, he thought, with that small tilted nose, but she had a good, firm mouth and chin, her eyes were bright, she had a few wandering freckles, and a spot of oil on her cheeks seemed quite in place. She looked very concentrated, with wrinkled lips, had not spoken

to him since she came into the cockpit, and her gaze was constantly roving from the dashboard to the country underneath. For himself he felt both angry and slyly amused, vexed at this invasion of his official privacy, amused at Booster's expression when he got such unexpected orders, and retired, growling, to the cabin. But Deming had said that under the circumstances he personally accepted all responsibility, so what the hell did it matter? Presently Wilding forgot the girl beside him, and pitched his thoughts northward.

Rachell! He had caught the look on her face when she stood on the bank waving, and it made him uncomfortable. Why the devil need she take things so seriously, and why should Whitson say what he did? It made one glad to get away from Aklavik, but he would be back in a week, and what then? He had tried and failed to picture himself making love to the girl; but love wasn't there or anywhere. He didn't need it—from anyone. Why couldn't she marry Louis, and get this romantic nonsense out of her head? There was always Red Lake to get away to, but a sense of irony protested against flight because a good-looking quarter-breed girl elected to camp on his trail. Damned if he'd go, and, in spite of everything, what a decent sort she was.

A touch on his shoulder: Paula pointed to the wheel, then herself. Frowning, he shook his head. She made an impudent face at him, then took out

a cigarette. He snatched it from her and put his heel on it. Another grimace, behind which he saw new devilry move in the curve of her lips, till again she pointed, this time to the east and with an air of astonishment. He turned his head and in a flash she had grasped the wheel.

Instantly things began to happen. The machine, it had been flying dead level, suddenly became drunk, gave a violent lurch; he felt her weight thrown against him and heard a squeal. In the cabin, Booster, to his vast surprise, found himself without any warning on top of the dozing President of the line who, without waking, automatically seized the mechanic's scalp and pulled hard, inflicting intense pain. When he opened his eyes, his fingers were still gripping the mechanic's hair, and the plane level again.

"What was that?" he demanded blinking. "Did I have a nightmare? Whew!"

Booster shook his head; through the partition window he could see Paula was sitting stiffly as far as possible over on her side of the cockpit with Wilding equally stiffly erect on his own. "Getting gay," he concluded, though there wasn't much room for it. Now Wilding glanced over his shoulder, caught the mechanic's eye and put a finger to his lips. That was enough.

"No, Mr. Deming, you didn't have no nightmare. It's often bumpy round here: passing from land over water, you're liable to get a down-current

any time, it's like holes in the air without any particular bottom to 'em."

Deming, not quite reassured, screwed his head round, noting the apparent discipline in the cockpit where the two occupants looked rigid.

"What kind of pilots do women—young women—make in your opinion?"

"Well, sir, that kind of depends: catch 'em and break 'em in young enough, and it comes automatic, like anything else. It ain't just flying—any fool can fly—it's judgment that makes a pilot."

"Any fool can fly!"

"That's my experience, but now and again any fool can't get down again. You watch Mr. Wilding next time we land."

The Junker droned on with periodical stops for fuel, and Wilding, hot with anger, making short cuts across the Mackenzie's long deep curves; he saved miles that way, but never, especially on a trip like this, was he beyond gliding distance from some possible landing. In the middle of one of these cuts, a thousand feet up, a league from the main river which now lay to the west, and over a chain of small intercommunicating lakes, suddenly Paula pointed again, this time to the oil gauge. The pressure was falling rapidly. His heart gave an extra beat, he had a sensation of instant concentration, and his brain was emptied of all else. Forced landing! Now he cut off ignition, and opened the partition door. The plane was quiet save for a high singing



whistle of wind through her pontoon struts. Again he caught Booster's eye, bent his head meaningly at Deming and pointed down. The door closed.

"What's up?" said Deming anxiously. "What's the matter now—why isn't the engine running?"

"Nothing much, sir, engine's all right. Mr. Wilding wants to make some little adjustment, probably nothing at all, but he's kind of particular about them small points. He's going to land for a few minutes. We're all right."

"Oh!" Deming felt a trifle abused: this flying business, once one had experienced the first mingled and rather exciting sensations, seemed so easy and simple, so straight-ahead, that he had been drowsing tranquilly, not thinking of pilots or planes or engines, and quite forgetful that his life lay in the hands of the unemotional young man so close by.

"You—er—you often do this?"

"Oh yes, sir," lied Booster cheerfully. "Every little while, nothing to it. Just like stopping a car to adjust a spark plug. These small matters count for quite a lot in our business."

Deming, making a mental note of this, grunted, looked out, and instead of empty air saw the earth, trees, water, low hills, all mixed up in a whizzing, streaking tangle, for Wilding was banking and side-slipping to reach one of the narrow lakes, and only he and Booster realised what a task that was from a thousand feet up. Now he flattened out, losing speed, cleared a belt of tall spruce with just three

feet between their spindly tops and the twin pontoons, and settled like a tired gull on quiet brown waters, a stone throw from the lake's northerly end. There had been room enough to get down and, absolutely—no—more. Then he tossed back the windshield, took a long breath of relief and lit a cigarette.

"I did like that," said Paula nodding approvingly. "Such a change from straight flying, wasn't it?"

He glanced at her with satirical interest. "Yes, quite a change, glad you enjoyed it."

"Just the oil feed gone wrong, wasn't it?"

"So far as I know."

"How long will we be here?"

"Do you consider that an intelligent question?"

"How polite we are to-day! What am I to do now?"

"Stay here till I tell you to get out," he snapped.

The plane floated in a tiny bay ringed with yellow sand. Booster and Wilding got down on the pontoons, unlashed a pole from the struts and pushed till the blunt noses of the floats grounded with a soft, yielding crunch. Wilding jumped with a rope and took a turn round a tree-trunk.

"All right, sir, please come ashore."

Deming climbed down and looked round: so far as one could tell, this lake had never known humanity before: there were no axe-marks, no stumps, no signs in the sand save the tracks of animals; it lay ringed with a living, breathing forest, and the silence was profound.

Wilding, seeing that his moorings were secure, now nodded at Paula. "You may get out now."

She did so, stiffly, and with what her father thought, an unwonted air of obedience, though never in her life had she felt so mutinous. She glanced at her pilot, but did not deign to speak, while he examined the sky, consulted his watch and got a confirming nod from Booster.

"Here for the night, sir," he announced. "We'll get busy, Tom. There's grub in the cabins, Mr. Deming, some dishes and things and sleep rolls. There's everything we need. If you and your daughter would care to help, please make a fire and get supper started; it'll save time. It'll be dark pretty soon. Got plenty of matches?"

"Yes, thank you, I have them."

"Right: I'd make the fire against that rock. Tom and I have our hands full."

He turned away, completely ignoring Paula, and was at once lost in an urgent matter of mechanics, while Booster produced a box of tools and began slacking innumerable nuts. Paula's brows went up and she noted on her father's face a dubious expression, for Deming felt a trifle slighted. Was he not President of the Company, and why had not Wilding explained this disturbing affair more fully? Was it not the custom—and were passengers—official ones—of such secondary importance in the sub-Arctics. That angle of it, he thought, needed looking into.

He had ample time to ponder over this while establishing a temporary base beside the indicated rock, which was fifty yards from the plane and close to the bush. Thither they ultimately carried the camping outfit, when came a pause while they regarded each other dubiously till Paula wandered off, returning with a scratched face and an armful of sticks that would not ignite, but only smouldered and smelled. She felt hot and humiliated; Deming now swearing with unabashed freedom, used his last match. The sun dipped, shadows lengthened and they stood surveying a charred tangle of twigs that would not inflame. From the plane came the sound of metal on metal, where Paula made out that Wilding was draining the engine of oil and had no thought of anything else. Deming, opening a can of tomatos, cut his finger and stood sucking it. A pan of beans, balanced precariously, upset into the half-ignited fire, the kettle of water declined to boil, and inefficiency was written widely on the trampled sand.

"Oh, damn! damn! damn!" said the girl in a choky voice. "Look at that mess!"

"For once in your life you've expressed my sentiments," conceded her father ruefully. "Thought you could light a fire."

"I haven't been in the world quite as long as you. Give me a chance."

"Ready for supper in ten minutes," shouted Wilding, now excessively oil-stained. "I'm hungry—I could eat a bed roll."

Paula, licking her lips, felt smaller than ever before in her life.

"Supper isn't nearly ready yet," she replied shakily.

"You've had forty minutes."

"I need fifty."

Wilding ignored that, and presently the two tramped along the beach, wiping stained hands on bunches of waste. He glanced at the unborn fire, the tepid kettle, the spilled tomatos, the display of entire failure, stroked his smooth chin, and said not a word, but gave Booster one eloquent look. On this, Booster, picking up an axe, disappeared, and they heard blows, till he returned with an armful of dry wood and the fire suddenly leaped to life. Wilding, collecting scattered utensils, got busy, there was an immediate change in local atmospherics, while a grateful odour spread abroad. Still he said nothing, but in fifteen minutes there was hot coffee, hot bread, hot beans, broiled bacon, and Booster had made a seat. Then Wilding, with no change of expression looked at his passengers.

"Supper's ready! Come and get it!"

Deming, who had a keen sense of humour, observed all this with growing understanding, was now secretly amused, and lost no time. Also, it would be a very useful thing to bring up in the future, and at last he had something on the over-confident insubordinate young person whose attitude had cost him so many uncertain moments in the

past. Furthermore, he was getting a new angle on desirable qualifications for a pilot of the north.

Paula was in a raging temper, but also exceedingly hungry, so in silence, and feeling oddly wormlike, she choked down her food and found it good. For Wilding, it appeared, she had ceased to exist: and he paid her no attention whatever. She watched him out of the tail of her eye, and he might have been at home in McMurray. Booster, eating stolidly as though stoking a furnace, had already put water to boil for dish-washing, and sat voiceless, champing his food. He was vastly interested, quite aware of the entire situation, and it gave his appetite a zest. That skirt from Vancouver, he reflected, was being shown what was what down north, and it served her right. Presently he vanished into the bush, where they heard him crashing about till he returned with a great log on his shoulder and banked up the fire. Paula began to feel drowsy.

"Those bed rolls, Mr. Deming," said Wilding a little later, "you and your daughter had better use them. Booster and I will be in the plane unless you'd sooner sleep there, but I think this is better: the mosquitoes won't bother you at night—it's too cool. We'll get away an hour or so after sunrise—say seven o'clock. I think you'd better turn in now, sir. Good night. This flying is more tiring than one would think to begin with. Come on, Tom."

"A very capable young man, that"—Deming

looked after him with interest—"the supper was excellent."

"I think he's simply horrid," snapped Paula vindictively.

"Why horrid?"

"Well, he can fly of course, that's what he's paid for—and cook in an amateur sort of way, but his manners are awful."

"I don't fancy that the company engages a man for his manners, while you can neither fly nor cook, so I don't see what—there—there—child, you're over tired. Better get into that—er—bed roll, if you can. There's nothing to cry about."

Three hours later, Wilding rose from a pile of first-class mail sacks, slid down to a pontoon and stepped ashore. The moon was bright and laid a silver pavement across the lake: its milky rays silvered the plane's great corrugated wings, silvered her tapering body, so that she looked like a gigantic flying fish that had broken the surface to breathe the still night air. No ripple stirred the water, breathless woods marched to its edge in a vast hush and, suddenly arrested, were mirrored in that shining basin. The northland lay asleep, divinely still under a spangled sky.

Wilding, unable to sleep, wanted to think, so, inhaling a cigarette, walked slowly along the strip of yellow sand; he could not divorce his mind from Rachel, from whatever he might have said, from just where he himself might honourably stand in

this matter. Under sudden duress he had lied to the girl, and she took him in good faith. He didn't love her, there was no faith in it, he didn't love anyone, and just wanted to stay free and fly—that was the career calling so insistently—fly all over the world if he could. The broken oil pipe didn't trouble him at all—or the forced landing, a small affair—what did trouble him was how to avoid hurting Rachel. Damn these women, all of them.

At this point in his soliloquy he perceived a figure sitting motionless a few yards distance.

"Hullo," it said.

"Hullo yourself! What's the matter? Can't you sleep?"

"That bed roll was too hot—I couldn't move once I was inside—so I got out to cool off. Isn't this a perfect spot?"

"It is, for catching cold. That's foolish of you."

"I won't catch cold, I feel too romantic."

"After that rough backwoods meal. Thanks for the implied compliment."

"Mr. Wilding."

"Present."

"Why are you so beastly to me? Does it give you any special pleasure or amusement?"

"Searching my past life I don't know that I am beastly, but one can never be sure."

"You're not very gallant or—er—courteous," she said in a small voice.

"You're in the North-west Territories, my girl,



where men are men and whisky is dynamite. We don't see many people like you down here."

"Thanks, but I don't believe that men are any less men when they are ordinarily civil to girls—or what it has to do with whisky."

"There might be something in that," he conceded. "I'll think it over. Smoke?"

"Thanks."

"Anything else on your mind?" he asked casually.

"Quite a lot, but you're not in a mood—that—well, is stimulating to conversation."

"We might make a stab at it: I can't do any more work before sunrise."

"Was it a broken oil pipe?"

"Strangely enough it was—a broken oil pipe."

"And why are you so angry with me?"

"Do I look angry?"

"Strangely enough, not at the moment."

"I'm not angry—that is, about anything in particular—I wasn't thinking of you at all."

"I see." Here she sent him a wicked little smile. "It's encouraging to know that my presence has ceased to annoy you. That's something."

"At the same time," he retorted, "and since you bring this subject up, you don't seem to be panning out very well on this joy ride of yours. Taking advantages of the fact that you're the President's daughter, you decide to shunt Jim Scott and me round to suit yourself; God knows why: next you insist on being where Booster ought to be by all

the rules of the road; and I'd hate to tell you what Booster thinks of you this minute: as though that weren't enough, you grab the stick—which, in the air, to put it mildly is a bit of dirty work; and finally you can't even make a fire when it's wanted, and you can't cook. I get you safely down here with a good deal more difficulty than you're aware of, and the net result of everything so far is that you feel hurt. Well, that's a form of reasoning I can't follow—I'm probably too slow. How's your father?"

"Thanks very much for your—er—searching analysis," she said coolly, "and as for father, he's asleep. By the way, I told him."

"Told him what?"

"That I grabbed the stick and made the machine go crazy for a minute. But everything I touch," she added, "doesn't go crazy—that is, at home."

Wilding gave a little chuckle. "Why did you tell him?"

"I thought—well—I thought that he might think it was your—that is—the pilot's fault—I didn't want that; it wasn't quite fair; and as to switching you and Mr. Scott round, I thought I'd like to consult you about something very special—I didn't know it was so hard to talk in the cockpit; as to the darned old fire and spilling those tomatos, I'm terribly sorry—no I'm not—and what's a can of tomatos anyway—but the men of the party always made the fires before on any picnic I've attended, and seemed glad to do it. I'll admit that I've a lot to learn about

the north and—er—some of the people in it, but I'm ready to begin any time. And I think that's all—at any rate for to-night."

She relieved herself in this fashion with such an odd mixture of mood in her voice, such an engaging combination of honesty and humour and contrition, that Wilding began to grin.

"You see," she concluded, "you're different but not entirely unattractive, and I was willing to put in a little work on you where you need it, but as things stand I hardly feel up to the job. As a pilot I assume you're up to standard, but as a human being—well—that's different—you need training."

"Thanks, thanks terribly. Leaving aside for the moment the question of your capacity to train anyone, which you'll permit me to question, you wanted to talk to me about something very special. Well, now's your chance—before you get a chill."

"You won't like it, and I feel the reverse of chilled."

"Probably not, judging by past experience."

"You'll think me rather fresh—I warn you now."

"Quite impossible," he countered dryly. "Let's have it."

"Well," she said in a low but very distinct voice, "it's Rachel."

"Oh!" His tone altered, hardening a little. "What about Rachel? Have you taken that over too?"

"Well, it's perfectly obvious that she's in love with you—anyone can see it, and you accept a

wonderful present. She's terribly serious. The most unattractive men sometimes manage to impress an inexperienced girl like her, though I can never see why myself. Anyway, I couldn't mistake her manner when you were there, while you seem to think nothing of it. It's bound to hurt her awfully before long, because you can't marry her—ever. And she was very kind to me—no one has ever been kinder, and it's going to break her heart. There, that's what I wanted to talk about, and you can think whatever you like."

"Who says I couldn't marry her?" asked Wilding stiffly. With no intention of showing it, he had a sort of cold anger, and meant to protect Rachel at whatever cost. "And," he added, "who asked you to get mixed up in it? You wouldn't make the same mistake at home."

"But—you just cannot!" she answered, flushing deeply. "Oh, I know what you're thinking about me and how all this sounds and the rest of it. I know enough to know that, but I just don't care. You don't belong to that kind of life at all."

"What life?"

"That of the husband of a woman who is part Indian: she'd soon be as unhappy as yourself. There, I've said it, and you can think about me as you please, but I had to say it."

"She's right," he reflected, "dead right! I know it too, but it isn't her business. She's plucky, and after a couple of days I won't see her again, so I

might as well keep hold of myself!" He cursed the parka and all connected with it.

"Look here," he replied quietly, "people down north don't argue like that, and if you find them different it's the north that makes them so. You don't know anything about this country or its folk till you've lived in it yourself; they're independent; they don't like others to come in from outside and explain things. The best way is to take us as you find us and leave it at that. Also you can't get the real north out of any book that was ever written: it won't go into print."

"Us?"

"That's the word I used. Are you in love with anyone yourself?"

"What has that to do with it?"

"Such a condition, I believe, is apt to affect one's judgment. Are you?"

"No," she said, now for the first time realising that she was.

"Then believe me, Rachel and I can look after our own affairs. Also, though I've no manners, I'm not a sadist, and don't like hurting others. You meant well—I'll accept that—now you'd better crawl back into the bed roll; it's always coldest here just before sunrise."

"Good night," said she briskly, "it's been so nice to meet you."

"Good—er—morning, Miss Deming, the pleasure is mine."

## CHAPTER V

SCOTT, not a little amused, turned up the Mackenzie to Fort Norman, refuelled, then struck east along the Bear River, flying low above its sea green waters that soon were to lose their transparency in the turbidity of the greater flood.

It was colder here than on the coast, skies were grey and the wilderness he travelled now exhibited its first scarcely perceptible sign of a change of season, with frost in early morning, and drifting patches of low-lying mist above which he sped as over a blanket of white fleece. The waters of Bear Lake, being warmer in early morning at this time of the year than the air, gave off a faint vapour like condensing steam.

He admired the country in which this inland ocean gleamed like a two hundred mile emerald; it was bold, assertive, with rounded bluffs scarified by ancient glaciers, pitted and scored, screened by stiff ranks of jack pine, with long, narrow sheltered bays enclosed by steep ridges. Everywhere the surface was rock, naked or coated with a thin skin of pine needles and soil. Nearing Cameron and Contact Bays he looked down on irregular patches where timber had been cut and yellow-brown cabins dotted the rocky slopes. He heard the thud of dynamite where surface work was going on, the rattle of

hoisting gear, and saw slate-coloured dumps spreading from working mines, where men burrowed mole-like in the ribs of earth for radium and silver. The Arctic circle ran across Bear Lake, but, unconscious of latitude, humanity smiled at that.

He came down hungry in Cameron Bay, and with Roberts walked up to the best restaurant in the north, where was shortly produced a caribou steak, succulent beyond words. Outside he could see the Olympian refrigerator from which it came, a log building twelve feet high, full of carcasses and ice in alternate layers, a gigantic multiple sandwich of meat and frost.

He was busy over his steak, and giving news from outside to a group of interested listeners, when Roberts, who had a two-month old newspaper propped against the cruet stand, gave a grunt.

"I've seen that face before somewhere. Read it."

There was printed a photograph of a man, his name, according to the article, being Prado, wanted for bank burglary. This had happened in Dawson City, Yukon Territory, three months previously, and the stolen amount was large. The man himself was clean-shaven with squarish shoulders, rather small eyes, his face wide across the cheek-bones, a pointed chin. His appearance revealed nothing striking, and he looked to be about forty. He had, it was stated, a bad career, at one time being a train despatcher discharged for delinquency in duty, and jailed for theft of railway funds. The hold-up

and robbery had taken place in June, and a reward of a thousand dollars was at once offered for information that would lead to his arrest.

Scott read, then stared at the photo without much interest.

"Where did you see him?"

"I'm trying to think—and not so long ago either. It's the eyes I remember—something odd about 'em—I remember they struck me at the time."

"Down here is about the last place for a man to bury himself," said Scott dubiously. "There's more safety in a crowd. You can get lost in a city, but here everyone knows where you are. If I wanted to fool the police I'd grow a beard and live next door to the station."

Roberts, unconvinced, shook his head and chewed on stolidly, his gaze fixed on the paper. There was something of the bloodhound in his disposition; he fancied himself as a sleuth, and didn't know how to give up.

"At the same time he might reckon that folks away out here don't—oh—I've got it."

"Got what?"

"Sure, that's it—first at McMurray and then at Aklavik three days ago—he came down north with Mr. Wilding. Name of Domert, that's him. He was hanging round the morning we left. I'll bet it's him."

"A pretty long shot. I'd be careful if I were you—might let yourself in for something awkward."



"Perhaps, but I'm on the mark. He's grown a beard and moustache. You'd expect that. But the rest of the face is the same. Changed his name—you'd expect that too."

"Well, what are you going to do, there's no proof?"

"I don't know. What's best?"

"You might wire the Corporal at Aklavik to keep an eye on him—anyway put the Corporal wise, that's all you can do to start with. He won't talk, and if it's Prado he'll dig it up."

"I can use that thousand, Mr. Scott. Queer things have happened out here, too. Why shouldn't it be Prado?"

"You're in earnest about it?"

"Sure I am."

"Then tell the Sergeant here, and no one else."

Roberts, approving this, finished his steak and went over to the barracks, where the Sergeant, to his disappointment, was not impressed.

"We've known about this since it happened, and every detachment was notified from headquarters. Got it straight from the Yukon. They thought he might make for the territories over the Divide and down the Peel. The detachment at Fort Macpherson was on the look-out: but he was too wise. But I don't think there's anything in your idea."

"On the other hand," persisted Roberts, "he might have laid low, grown his beard and then come out by Skagway, U.S. territory. I tell you I've got a

hunch, and this fellow's only been in Aklavik for three days."

"He can't get away unless he walks."

"Oh yes, he can; a Husky schooner would take him along the coast to Barrow any day. Look here, you send a wire, and if I'm wrong I'll pay for it, that's fair enough."

"Well, I'll go that far. Where are you for now?"

"The Coppermine. Back in a couple of days. I'll see you then. So long."

An hour later Scott had cleared the timbered country and was out over the Barrens, with the hills of Bear Lake fading in blue distance to the west. From the south-west the Coppermine slid down in lazy curves and had the colour of grey steel. The land lay naked, only in ravines along twisting water-courses were there prickly patches of small stunted spruce and ground birch whose diminishing and scattered pin points—for so they appeared from the air—stood up in scattered bristles like a worn-out hair-brush. This was the Dismal Lake area where roamed herds of innumerable caribou, and, flying low, Scott could watch their bounding buff-coloured bodies streaking in full flight across the tundra. Lakes were everywhere naked, frigid, inhospitable, unsheltered from wind and weather, yet this forbidding area was the reservoir of food, the butcher's shop of the Arctic.

Presently far distant elevations came in sight, the southern coast of Victoria Island, and they flew

over Bloody Falls, where the Coppermine writhed in streaks of foam. Now a wide flat band on the horizon, the Arctic Ocean, with the sea ice lying a few miles out, then a few white rectangular dots, grains of salt on the treeless dun-coloured coast. Humanity after a great emptiness.

They landed on salt water by a shingle beach, to be received joyfully by a crowd of Eskimo, and, with less demonstration, by the ten whites comprising the foreign-born population of Old Fort Hearne. The sun set as the pontoons touched land.

Scott did his business, unloaded mail sacks and with the Corporal in charge of the local police detachment, went in search of Isaluk, finding him in a conical-shaped habitation of tanned hide, the Husky summer house, a man sick to death on a bed of skin, his face gaunt and ghastly. Sickness, he believed, was the imposition of some evil spirit whom he had unwittingly offended, a thing that only magic might defeat, or the intercession of some other stronger spirit, and though there was no hope of that now, he looked up at the pilot and smiled, having heard the plane pass overhead.

"You see my brother Pituluk, at Aklavik?" he whispered weakly.

Scott nodded. "Yes, he spoke of you and told me you were sick. There are certain things he asked me to do."

"Me pretty soon all right dead, I guess."

Scott looked at the man's wife squatting motionless

with seamed face, rusty teeth, her steady, questioning gaze full of resignation, and his heart moved with pity. How brave these brown people were!

"No, you won't, you're going to get well."

Isaluk smiled again, but only with his eyes; for a month ago he had seen The Thing that walks by Night, and knew that his fate was sealed, for only those about to die had ever discerned this apparition, whose fatal patrol was along the south coast of the Beaufort Sea. It never came inland.

"You're going to get well, I tell you. You're coming with me in the plane to Fort Smith, big hospital there, plenty doctors, good medicine. Understand?"

He understood, lifted a broad sinewy finger whose tip was the colour of old ivory, and then in a cracked voice told his wife, for she spoke no English. Her eyes also turned to Scott; but she said nothing, made no gesture. They were both at the disposition of some invisible power that ruled every Husky in the Western Arctic, and nothing revealed in their attitude or expression the emotion he knew they felt. Things happened as they were meant to happen. That was the basic fact, proved beyond any argument or kindly attempt to comfort, and nothing would change them. Life had always been like that for them, so why should it be different now, even though death crouched waiting at the door.

"As soon as it is light we go," continued Scott. "No fur to take this time—just you and the mail

sacks. Pretty soon you sleep—by and by you wake up in Forth Smith. See doctor there—get plenty medicine, then pretty soon all right. Understand? We come back soon.”

“No money,” breathed Isaluk with difficulty.

“You no need money—Pituluk he pay—he fix all that.”

There followed another translation, and this time the woman nodded slowly. She knew he would go, but did not think he would come back. Other men she had seen with that look on their faces, and the end was always the same: they never came back.

Scott was away as light broadened over the grey face of Coronation Gulf. Isaluk lay in his best parka, cushioned on mail sacks; beside him an Oblate priest bound for the headquarters of his Order at Fort Smith. Father Rioux, like the rest of his fraternity, was something of a doctor, and Scott felt glad of his presence. He sat beside Isaluk and spoke to him in comforting tones, a big man with a thick, black beard, a kindly, sun-burned face, and muscular, workworn hands. The Oblates were pioneers, asking nothing more than to give lives of service in these northern solitudes, so that the north received and held and used them till they died, and the aurora flamed over their lonely graves. But they were not forgotten.

Half an hour out, Roberts pointed west. Squally with gusts of snow—exactly the condition that Scott

hoped to escape—at once they were in it, with the land obscured.

He pulled back the stick, climbing to seven thousand feet where they were above the snow, but the wind still more savage. Now he headed for Cameron Bay, two hundred miles a little south of west, and his speed brought the gale nearly dead ahead. Fifty miles over the ground he reckoned he was making, but no more. A good three hours to Cameron Bay if——

An hour passed with no diminution in the whirling maze, then another, while he explored different air levels, feeling the plane quiver as the wind took her, daringly dropping and dropping till his altimeter showed only three hundred feet, when Roberts glanced at him dubiously. But there were no three hundred foot elevations in the Dismal Lake country, and even at this low altitude the ground still lay hidden.

Wind velocity increased, and now the machine developed a curious disconcerting lethargy: she responded with sluggishness, exhibiting unnatural effort in maintaining height.

"Ice on the wings," creaked Roberts, touching his elbow, "we'd better get down somewhere out of this."

Scott could see it, had already seen it, a thickening, glassy skin on the leading edge of the metal pinions, deforming their carefully calculated outline, reducing their lifting power, this being the danger that lurked when air temperature was just below

freezing, with uncondensed and suspended moisture. It affected the propeller in the same deadly fashion, so that both lift and pull were gravely hampered.

Edging back the stick, he thought hard. No telling how far to the north-west this storm extended, or whether he could stay up long enough to fly through it: on the other hand he might, by turning southward, work out of it: but that would bring him over a new country of which he knew little, the great unmapped area south-east of Bear Lake, the Yellowknife district, and off the travelled route. Also he might stay up long enough to reach Fort Rae, and on that run the gale would be more favourable.

Came a tapping, and Father Rioux' bronze face framed in the little window. Scott gave Roberts the dual control, and climbed back.

"Where are we, my son?"

"Frankly, I don't know to a mile or two: it's bad flying."

"I can tell that. We are making for Cameron Bay?"

"I may change and try Fort Rae."

"How long will that be?"

Scott made an indefinite gesture. "How is our Husky?"

"He is just alive. How high have we been flying?"

"Up to seven thousand looking for a hole in this blizzard."

"I thought it was like that; the air was too thin for his lungs."

"Couldn't help it, Father."

"My son, do I not know? We are all in the hands of God."

Scott glanced at Isaluk whose eyes looked glazed: he hardly seemed to breathe, and death could not be far away.

"We'll get down as soon as we can: I can't promise any more than that."

In the cockpit again, he banked a little, and turned south. Still no ground was visible, and he flew on aware of the gravity of Roberts' face, feeling for solid earth till he dared feel no closer, and finding none. Strange, he thought, to encounter weather of this sort at this time of year unless it meant that the freeze-up was coming a fortnight early, in which case——!

Now the plane laboured like a wounded bird: over four hours in the air, and fuel low. Roberts pointed to the indicator. They must land soon—or crash.

Came a rift in the blizzard, a sort of cessation in the white cloud, and Scott had a brief glimpse of open water beneath: it looked black. Instantly he dived, and, diving, heard the engine splutter, then miss. Three hundred feet beneath was a lake, its shores fringed with ice, and in the middle a naked island that looked perhaps two hundred feet long with shallow water all round. No ice there. 'Twas utterly barren, but never had a wedge of rock seemed so hospitable.



Now, nursing what impetus the machine retained, he was very careful in measuring height, distance and speed. Did he miss that island the wind would take him out into the icefringed lake—to stay for how long? Also he must reach it on the lee side, or smash his pontoons.

He touched water in a cloud of spray, now a bump, with instant diminution of speed, the machine checking as though at the pull of an anchor chain. Roberts, from a pontoon, and holding a rope, jumped into three feet of icy water, ploughed ashore, squatted, bracing his feet in a crack, and hauled lustily. The plane drew in by inches. Now Scott was with him taking a turn round a loose slab. Safe for the time being—perhaps too safe if this was the real freeze-up!

## CHAPTER VI

THE Signal Office at Aklavik was heated by a large cast-iron stove in which now pattered a comfortable fire on the coldest morning of the dwindling year, and, reflected the day operator, it heralded much colder ones to come. He rather liked the winter when it did arrive in earnest—one could move about, trail anywhere and keep dry, and there was good shooting, and fishing through the ice, but first there must be endured that dislocating six weeks, when there was no security of journey by water, land or air, and the whole north country was in a state of gradual transition according to latitude. At McMurray, for instance, it would still be autumn with open water, say, in October, and the leaves just falling; at Fort Smith one would find the first snow flying, and ice forming in still water, but not enough to carry a man, while at Aklavik it would have formed, so that a plane leaving the southerly base on pontoons would find no ice-free landing place a thousand miles down north. That was the freeze-up, during which the pilots kicked their heels and took holiday while the machines were being fitted with skis for winter service.

"Morning," said a voice at the door.

"Come in."

"Turning colder, eh?" Domert took a chair near the stove and looked about with interest at the electrical equipment and terminals. "Any objection to a visitor?"

"Make yourself at home. Came in by air, didn't you?"

"Yes; quite a place you've got here."

"It's not so bad, it does the work."

Domert stared round with interest. "I don't know the first thing about it myself, I guess it takes a certain kind of man to understand wireless. Have a cigar?"

"Thanks. You here for the winter?"

"I reckon to do a bit of trading, my stuff's coming in on the *Distributor*. Heard anything of her?"

"She might be in this afternoon, she's late. The winter's come here early, so she'll get back as soon as she can or be frozen in. They'll pull her out at Fort Smith."

"Did she ever get frozen in?" asked Domert with interest.

"Once, half way up south. It didn't do her any good, either. They had to yank her out where she stuck."

Domert bit off the end of a cigar and rolled it in his lips. "Is there much fur round here?"

"Pretty good. It depends a lot on prices. If they're low the natives won't catch more than it takes to keep them alive."

"Better at it than whites, aren't they?"

"No, I'd say not. The white traper has a system, he's out for business. When it comes to skill a good white is the equal of any Husky or Indian, and he thinks ahead. The native doesn't—is easily discouraged—if he has supplies for a few weeks ahead he doesn't reckon beyond that."

"Do they get the same price for fur?"

"Just the same, cash or trade, but the Huskies are no fools. One of 'em wired Vancouver the other day for a quotation on white fox—he wasn't satisfied with what he was offered here."

Domert nodded reflectively. "How many inhabitants here through the winter?"

"You mean white?"

"Yes."

"Say about thirty-five—with natives coming and going, mostly Huskies, who don't like the Indians."

"Why is that?"

"Dunno, but I've an idea they despise the Indians—being better men themselves—of course they keep in the open, don't trap in the bush. They're afraid of trees—something unnatural about a tree to the Husky. They're most generous too—will share anything they've got, however little. I like 'em myself. They look straight at us and smile, while an Indian will look sideways—and sullen."

"What about a half or quarter breed?" asked Domert smoothly.

"Hard to say—there's one living here—Rachel Bedell—best mixed blood I've ever seen. As good as

any man in the woods—we all like her, but if a man put his hands on her she'd scratch his eyes out. Well fixed, too."

"Interesting, eh! what stations do you get?"

"All the N.W. and Ottawa, of course. Understand Morse?"

"A foreign language to me—so is wireless," said Domert smoothly; "I haven't got that kind of brain."

"Come in when you've nothing better to do, and I'll teach you Morse. Can't tell when it might be useful."

"Thanks, I'll do that. I suppose there's a call for every station."

"Sure." The operator handed over a bit of cardboard, giving wavelengths and calls of a dozen stations. "It's like dialling a telephone number."

Domert, shaking his head, gave it back, and just at this moment a key began to tilt. The operator turned. "There's Bear Lake now, wait a minute, will you?"

He lifted his hand for silence, the metal key clicked and began to talk in curt, abrupt fashion.

"This is Cameron Bay N.W.T. Cameron Bay N.W.T. calling Aklavik—Message to Corporal in charge R.C.M.P. Aklavik. Have reason to suspect that man calling himself Domert now at Aklavik may possibly be Paul Prado wanted for bank robbery in Yukon territory last June. Please investigate at once without arousing suspicion and report to Fort Smith. Dakers, Sergeant R.C.M.P. Great Bear Lake."

The operator, pencil poised irresolute, blinked at his own writing, and, slowly wheeling his chair, regarded his visitor with a puzzled look. Domert, too, had turned a second after the key began to click, so that now his back was towards the key-board, and he sat rigidly motionless, his eyes wide open and very sharp, brows pulled down, lips set in a hard line, nostrils tightened. Every instinct in the man was keenly alert. Yet with all this tenseness he exhibited a curious touch of something like amusement.

"Queer," thought the operator, his brain suddenly very alive, "that such a message should come in at this particular moment, and damned lucky this stranger couldn't read Morse." On the other hand, it was just the sort of thing that did happen in the north, where a man couldn't easily get lost, and was apt to be found dead if he did. Also a bit of luck for Aklavik if he was Prada. "Careful," he whispered to himself, "careful, now!"

"I'm going out for a moment," said he casually, "make yourself comfortable."

"Anything special doing at Bear Lake?"

"No, the Airways people want to know how many drums of gasolene are in store here."

Domert got up and stretched himself, his expression now quite normal. "Thanks, I'm going over to my tent. Got some trade stuff there to sort out. See you later."

He lounged off, and the operator hastening across

to barracks found Corporal Jenks, a big, deep-chested man with a voice curiously at variance from his bulk. Where one expected a bull-like tone, there came a sort of modulated softness very surprising. At the moment he was in shirt sleeves, reading, smoking, and watching an Eskimo prisoner, known as Pop, but whose real native name was Ahtigiak, meaning in English, the "beautiful ptarmigan." Pop was serving five years' detention in Aklavik Barracks for the killing in King William Land of a too-ardent admirer of his wife, and enjoyed this incarceration extremely. Well clothed, much better than ever before in his life, well fed, he made himself generally useful, cutting grass and ice, chopping wood, and carried with him all day the key of the steel cage in which he slept every night. He was very proud of his cell, but were he confined there, he had died in a month. It was generally anticipated that when his time was up he would refuse to leave.

"Job for you, Corp," said the operator. "Look at this! Domert was in the office when it came over."

Jenks, laying aside his pipe, studied the paper impassively. "That old Prado business up again, eh? About time for it to come round." He rummaged in a file. "Here it is; every detachment got it months ago, and the north was combed bare—with nothing doing. No, I don't think there's anything in this. If Prado wanted to get lost, he wouldn't come here. You say he was in the office when this came through?"

"In a chair about two feet away: I watched him when receiving, but he didn't turn a hair."

"He might have got on to it just the same. Prado, according to our information, was a train despatcher before he went wrong."

"Not a chance of it. We'd been talking about wireless and he told me he doesn't understand Morse."

"But just the same, supposing he did, and that's why he was hanging round your place? Exactly what a fugitive train despatcher would do, isn't it?"

"That's a long shot—too long—well, it's up to you."

The operator walked off, and Jenks, who was in shirt-sleeves, put on tunic and belt, moving with the deliberation of most big men. He had been in Aklavik for two years with nothing much happening of interest, save the annual trip to Herschell Island in August by the police boat and some winter patrols along the Mackenzie and Arctic coasts. A good hard life and he liked it. Most of his work was in keeping people out of trouble rather than arresting them later on, a compromise between officialdom and paternalism, collecting the fur tax, protecting game out of season, issuing trapping licenses, and such routine duties as fell to him in a land where there was no income tax, no unemployment, no poverty, and no riches. He was doing well, took pride in the neatness of the barracks, had picked up enough Husky lingo for ordinary purposes,



had two constables under him and was slated for promotion next year.

"Of course," he reflected, donning a wide-brimmed Stetson hat, "if it should be Prado it won't do me any harm."

Now neat enough for a parade, with glossy leggings, polished brown boots and belt, shoulders squared, he strode over, passing the time of day with Burstall, beyond the wireless office, Louis' store and Rachel's scientifically hewn cabin, on to a small wedgetent, pitched forty feet back from the river bank, not far from the Hudson's Bay store. The flap was open and inside Domert was squatting on a ground sheet with the contents of a pile of newly-examined parcels strewn beside him. Very occupied, he was studying what seemed to be an account, and not till Jenks' shadow darkened the tent did he look up.

"Hullo, Corporal! come in—sit down. What's the last news in Aklavik?"

Jenks nodded. "Hullo! you look busy."

"I am—also I'm fed up. By God, those sharks in Winnipeg are robbers. Look at that bill, will you?"

"What's the matter with it?"

"Now look at the stuff. It's all cheap jack cotton goods instead of wool—cotton socks—second-grade pipes instead of first."

Jenks fingered a paper-thin shirt. "What's happened?"

"I brought my stock in June last, picked it out, checked it over, put it aside, paid for it, there's the

receipt, and they were to send it after me. Well, that's what they've sent, and I'm stuck. I didn't think about it again until I got here and unpacked—and that's only a small part of it. The rest's due now on the *Distributor*, to-day I guess, and I'm betting it's just the same. They double-crossed me."

Jenks took the bill, studying it closely; it was itemised, and made out to one Peter Domert on the 15th June that year, and receipted. He looked at the stuff, which certainly did not tally.

"Nothing doing here," he thought. "No man could ask for a better alibi." It struck him as a little odd that at this very hour, just an hour after the Bear Lake message, there should be such unquestionable evidence to hand and ready for him, but, after all, what more natural than that a man who proposed to do business in this country should be inspecting his stock?

And this stranger, if he happened to be Prado, exhibited no sign of discomfort.

"Going to trade here?" he asked briefly.

"I might, I can't tell. Depends how much fur there is. Prospects aren't just what I was told before I came in."

"Got your license?"

"Sure." The man took it from a leather wallet, all in order, signed and receipted to Peter Domert, and dated a month previously in Edmonton.

"You bought your stuff before you got this, eh? Why was that?"

"I did because prices were better in Winnipeg, then I came west. Wasn't feeling so well about then—so took a few months off knocking round till it got pretty late in the season."

"Going to trap?"

"I guess not—don't know a thing about it."

"You'll need a license for that, too, if you do. And any fur you get pays the fur tax—it averages five per cent of market price."

"I know—that's all right. Smoke?" He opened a box of cigars with bright red bands.

"No, thanks, I use a pipe. Have you been down North before?"

"Nope. Kind of curious about me, aren't you, Corporal?" This with a smile faintly ironical.

"No, not any too curious," said Jenks stiffly, "it's just my business to know who people are while they're here, and what they're doing. No one who just looks after his own business and doesn't misuse the natives gets into any trouble."

"Sort of big brother administration, eh?"

"Call it what you like: it's my duty, anyway. If you're going anywhere this winter, up river or along the coast, we've got to know because you're liable well—to get lost, or sick and it's our job to go after you. If you're broke, we ration you till we can send you out. You don't have to pay any income tax here, or anything else, except just what I've told you. That's law in the Territories. If you get stuck or have

trouble with Huskies or Indians, we want to know that too. Understand?"

"It don't sound very like a free agent to me," said Domert, a shade caustically.

Jenks gave a shrug. He had been studying this stranger noting the smooth white hands, unscarred, strong, capable, but not those of an outdoor man: his body also was strong, agile, suggesting endurance, his manner very assured and he might have been in authority once. He sounded practical, but something about him intimated that he was using Aklavik not altogether for trading. He didn't look like a fugitive, he appeared quite at home and at the same time rather out of place.

"Well," he added, "I won't make your work any more difficult here, you can reckon on that."

Jenks went off little more informed than when he came, while Domert watched the straight, military figure with a faint frown and something of a sneer, then lit a cigar and surveyed the open parcels with a satirical eye. He was doing this when a throaty whistle sounded up river. *The Distributor!*

The arrival of that broad-flat-bottomed craft was far more significant to the folk of the Arctic than could be appreciated by those living outside, especially on this, her last trip of the season. She drew only four feet of water, but towered high with a white wheel-house, a row of white cabins on her upper deck, broad, flat, square-ended bows that pushed ahead of

her a five hundred ton scow, all the twelve hundred long twisting miles from Fort Smith: she burned quantities of cordwood, picked up from the high clay banks, and the thrashing beat of her big stern wheel driven by a pair of twin-connecting-rods, was a welcome sound in the wilderness. To sit in her wheelhouse and listen to the talk that went on there as she swung down mid-channel, or guided by brown hands on the whirling spokes, cut diagonally across the brown current and dutifully picked her way between invisible ledges and shifting banks, where a faint surface change perceptible only to the eye of experience told of shallows beneath; to sit, saying nothing, and listen to tales of ice jams at Fort Simpson sixty feet high before the great Mackenzie burst her winter manacles: of floods where it surged over forty foot banks, invading the surrounding country: of storms on Lake Athabasca, and the early arrival of the freeze-up when the old stern-wheeler fought her way to safety up south with newly-made ice scoring her sheathed ribs: to do this was to learn something of the north, and to understand how it was that when *The Distributor*, servant of the far north, met trouble, the folk of that vicinity whose loyal servant she was, the faithful courier between them and outside, found trouble with her. Now she was laden with winter supplies for the far north, food and trade stuffs. In a day or two when she had discharged this essential burden and turned to labour her way up south where she would rest till next June, she was

followed by many a wistful eye, for till then the only route was by air or the snow-shoe trail.

Pituluk, the Husky, watched her silently, saw her made fast, saw the long gang plank run out and the passengers come ashore, amongst them a man who immediately attracted his attention as he carried under his arm a tall contrivance unlike anything that had been landed at Aklavik before. It was something mechanical, and, being a good mechanic, like all Huskies, and loving tinkering with any contrivance he could get hold of, he shadowed this stranger with mounting curiosity. Other of this man's possessions also came ashore in small neat boxes with brass locks, till with all collected around he stood on the bank gazing curiously about, then beckoned to Pituluk.

Ten minutes later, he was housed in the Aklavik hotel, a forbidding block of a structure behind the Hudson's Bay store, and here he hung out a sign that meant nothing to Pituluk, but much to a good many others. It read: "J. Ingalls, Dentist."

Pituluk, who had followed him like a retriever, every instinct of curiosity alive, gazed and wondered. He saw the tall contrivance set up, and marvelled the more when Ingalls' foot was put upon one end of it and immediately the thing began to hum. Opening a case, the stranger put a small point of steel into the other end, and it began to rotate like the propeller of a boat, but very much faster, and though Pituluk knew all about power schooners and carburettor jets, he knew nothing whatever about this. Next he saw

the small boxes unlocked, displaying a battery of shining pliers with shiny handles, and marvelled what these might be for, and it was not until Louis Dufaut walked in, sat down in a chair, and the stranger opening his mouth looked inside and grasped one of the pliers that the great truth became clear. This was a tooth doctor. Thereupon Pituluk sat quite motionless in a corner and forgot all else.

Now it is not possible completely to enter into his fascinated mind, or comprehend the entrancement of the rest of that day. He felt no hunger, and as the hours passed he did not budge, even when Ingalls stopped for dinner. He saw the population of Aklavik offer themselves in a voluntary procession to the tooth doctor, suffer grievously, make many strange faces, pay money, much money, and depart with gratitude. When Whitson squirmed in the chair under the drill the whirring sound was like music to the enthralled observer; when a tooth came out and Ingalls flipped it from the shiny pliers with a little jerk of the wrist, Pituluk's foot would creep out and retrieve the gory thing, to be stowed in the corner of his red cotton handkerchief. At nightfall he had acquired a varied and revolting collection, nor had he spoken one word when he went back to his schooner so silent and preoccupied that Oomgah, partner of his life, ultimately lost patience.

"What is the matter with my husband? Has his tongue come out that he does not speak?"

Pituluk gazed at her blankly, his mind filled with great and aspiring thoughts: she was a good wife, and he loved her, but she was only a woman.

"There are many things in your husband's head, very many, like fish spawning in a stream before winter comes."

"So many that he will not eat?"

"Your husband is not hungry," said he, surveying the greasy cabin table with unaccustomed contempt. There were five white chambers of different sizes, these being the customary Husky table-ware on the Beaufort Sea—each with a half-boiled fish, head, tail, entrails and all.

"What are these new things in his head?"

"It may be that some other time it will be told, but not yet. Also it may——"

At that he broke off eyeing her with new, sudden and vivid interest, regarding her rusty, jagged teeth to which he was by now well accustomed, for the greatest thought of all had just flashed in. Was it possible that——? He nodded, slowly, slowly. Of a truth he was on the eve of wonderful things, so for the rest of that night he did not speak, and when Ingalls started work next morning, the Eskimo observer had occupied his former corner as silent and watchful as ever.

The work finished at six in the evening, for Ingalls was going south in *The Distributor* that night, and now for the very first time the hunter found his voice. He rose, feeling in his pocket the comfortable lump



made by many contributed molars, and looked Ingalls straight in the eye.

"You go back south now?"

"Yes."

"And not come here any more?"

"No, I've had enough of Aklavik to do me."

"You take this away?" Pituluk indicated the foot drill and collection of instruments.

"Of course, why not?"

"You no sell it—all of it?"

"Sell it! Who would I sell it to?" The dentist spoke impatiently, not having done so well as he had hoped considering the expense of his journey.

"To me. I buy it. Me like very much to buy it."

"What the devil do you want with it, you can't use it."

"Pituluk use it all right. How much?"

"For all of it?"

"All of it—I buy, I use it. I know now—me pretty soon Husky tooth-doctor."

Ingalls chuckled. The thing was absurd, but on the other hand he also knew that many of these natives were men of substance. Also this equipment—it had served its time for too many years past—was in urgent need of replacement, so, observing the serious manner of his unexpected client, the idea struck him rather favourably. Why not?

"You want it really?"

"Yes, Pituluk want it. How much?"

"Three hundred dollars," said Ingalls.

"You wait here, me come back."

He went out quickly to the Hudson's Bay store and came back with a cheque signed by the Post Manager, for, had Ingalls known it, Pituluk was worth fifteen thousand dollars in an Edmonton bank and a much richer man than himself, and, as for many another hunter, Donaldson looked after his finances. Now, fingering the cheque, the vendor felt a little ashamed.

"Sure you want this stuff?" he said.

Pituluk's grin revealed teeth of a superb quality; "Yes, sure me want it, go many places this winter. That's all right."

*The Distributor*, after a good many urgent and warning blasts, started south under clear skies, thrashing off in the quiet of the night, her electrics all glittering. The flood waters were long since passed and the Mackenzie had fallen rapidly, was still falling, and there were now long stretches where sand-bars cut diagonally across the winding channel making navigation a tricky business. One had to know this great stream in all its phases and remember that these bars were continually changing though never lessening at this time of the year, and only by the constant sweeping play of her searchlight could the old stern wheeler pick her way in safety through the opaque confusion of the long-shore shadows. Twelve hundred risky miles to travel before she could be pulled up on skids in the back-water below Fort Smith out of reach of the ice,

for if one got hung up *en route* and the freeze-up arrived, that same ice would carry her hull in splinters to the Arctic next June.

She was an ancient craft over-seasoned after many years of service, with two big king posts standing up amidships and steel cables fore and aft over each, making her into a sort of floating bridge truss, stiffening her creaky joints. They all loved her. In the vast stretches of the Mackenzie she was only a moving speck, but she stood for something that the outsider could not understand. Woodcutters back in the bush heard her thrashing in the distance and nodded to each other; Scott and his brother pilot looked down at her from the air, flew lower and dipped a wing; trouble on a bar became a matter of general concern, and when she arrived in the delta on her first trip, she was a living, breathing human thing, loaded to the gunwale with welcome freight and excited humanity, the trusted link between down north and up south.

Now, as the night slowly swallowed her it was a sobering moment.

Pituluk stood a little apart from the rest, possessed by hidden emotions. When he waved good-bye to Ingalls, he felt that this man's cloak had fallen on his own shoulders, that he had a mission to perform amongst his own people—such would now be his life's work—his name would be spoken with respect, his reputation unquestioned along the Beaufort Sea and perhaps even as far as Coronation Gulf. In his

pocket, knotted in a loop of red cotton, rested part of his stock-in-trade: as far as he could see there was nothing the matter with many of the extracted teeth, they were white man's teeth, hardly worn down at all, might very well be used again, and were quite good enough for Huskies. This human detritus from the floor of Ingalls' operating room must, however, now be cleaned, so he nodded contentedly and started for his schooner. Here he poked his slumbering wife in the ribs and slid under a pile of skins beside her.

"There is much in the mind of your husband," he said, "and maybe this winter will not be like any other. I am sure it will not."

She turned to him a broad, indifferent, naked back. "If he gives us enough to eat, what does that matter?"

"He was thinking not of meat, but of his name and that of his children's children's children," replied Pituluk loftily.

"His wife does not yet understand, but she will before long.

"Also she is about to travel very far."

"Perhaps that is so, but there is one thing she does understand," mumbled Oomgah, with drowsy assurance.

"What is that?"

"She is going to have another child, while already there are more than enough. Now it is in her mind that she would sleep."

## CHAPTER] VII

**W**ILDING flew at four thousand feet over Great Slave Lake between Hay River and Resolution where he would refuel; the air was so still that his hands were practically motionless, and the plane burrowed swiftly through caves of tranquillity: to the east he could see flotillas of long, pointed low-lying islands on the placid surface, all headed in the same direction like a squadron of destroyers leaving their home port. These were outliers of the country of the Yellowknives. Southward he traced the curves of Hay River, and still farther a plume of sunlit spray lifted from the plunging waters of Hamilton Falls.

Thus poised in body and mind, he ruminated silently over his own affairs, smiling a little when he thought of his forced landing. As to that matter, he was well-content: Deming had been very nice about it, and said afterwards that it was an interesting and quite illuminating experience. He had learned something useful and, it seemed, rather enjoyed it. They had lost a few hours, but nothing more, and got away without much trouble at day-break.

As for Paula, he reflected that that young woman had had a useful lesson and now showed indications of being less obstreperous, though not in any way humble. To-day she was back in the cabin where

she ought to be. Certainly she had intruded on other people's business in talking about Rachel, which he resented, but he admitted that what she said was reasonable enough. He could not see himself married to anyone, least of all Rachel: for the next few years he wanted to fly, to continue to find in the air the call of which his whole nature responded. 'Twas enough for any man of his age. He loved the air; he rejoiced in the contest it imposed; in these free spaces he found a spiritual home, and for the present, there were no inward questions or aspirations that the life of a northern pilot did not satisfy.

Now Resolution, with its narrow-finger-like dock, projecting into the shallow waters of Great Slave Lake. Here his passengers got out to explore, and while Wilding was fuelling an anxious man hurried down from the Hudson's Bay store.

"Hullo! I'm glad to see you. Where are you for?"

"Hullo, Masters, I'm not here for long. Anything going south?"

The Post Manager made a desperate gesture.

"We've a little mail but no freight. Look here, my wife—she's sick, she's bad, Jack and I'm scared. She had a fall the day before yesterday, and—well—the baby came before it should—maybe two months early. Now I think she's dying. The doctor's off at Fort Reliance in the power boat to see some Yellow-knives, and I had to do everything I could myself.

It wasn't much. The baby's all right, but——" He broke off disjointedly, then with increasing agitation. "I think she's got some kind of blood-poisoning."

Wilding looked grave: he was only twenty-five, but somehow in this northern life one did not wait long to become participator in its manifold phases. The instant issues of existence came with a rush. Death or life—life or death—will you take the chance? So often that alternative came up. "Will you die now quickly, easily, or will you fight on with the odds a hundred to one against you?" But one always fought! He was searching the tortured eyes when Paula came back.

"What is it?" she said quickly. "Anything wrong?"

Masters explained curtly. He didn't want sympathy, but help; also he had heard that the Demings were out for a joy-ride. Everyone in the territory knew that. He looked at her without much hope, thinking how little people of her sort were aware of the troubles of those like himself.

"Well, Jack," he went on quickly, "what about it? Can you fix it to take her and the baby? She can't leave it. For God's sake help me out."

"And if she dies in the air?" said the young man soberly.

"She'll die here on the ground; it's her only chance. Dr. Burrow will pull her through at Fort Smith if anyone can."

Wilding had a moment of indecision. No wireless station here, no chance to get authority from the base, and the picture of himself landing at Fort Smith two hundred miles south with a dead woman in the cabin. Then he met Paula's eyes fixed on him in a way that made her look strangely older, as though this grim intrusion of instant need and sharp responsibility had obliterated all smaller personal matters of the present and brought her face to face with stern, fundamental things. What she thought of him was of no import, but he felt that some other inner Paula of whom he was quite ignorant waited for his answer.

"If she dies in the air, it's my responsibility," Masters repeated urgently, "all mine, but I can't sit here and watch her die."

"All right then." Wilding gave his head a characteristic lift. "Mr. Deming, I've your permission?"

"Yes, yes, certainly." Deming was getting unexpected light on this new business of his, and began to visualise it as not altogether one of commercial profit, which oddly enough rather pleased him. For some reason, he was not keen on making money out of people like this; and as for the company, it began to have points of difference from any other with which he was connected. It must do everything possible. Then to his own astonishment he added, "That's just what we're here for. Paula, you will look after the baby?"



"Of course I will."

The rest of that day always remained vivid in the girl's memory. The plane's bullet-like flight up the Slave River with its burden of human hopes and fears; the warm feeling of the baby in her unaccustomed arms: the woman lying hot with fever—she seemed to know that she was in the air and her burning eyes fixed on her husband, full of unuttered questions; her husband's face as he bent over her; Deming's solicitude and the thoughtful expression born of a new interpolation stirring in his brain. The steady note of the Pratt-Whitney, and Wilding's back—for not once did he look round. The Slave River unrolling its sinuous track far below, the sudden startling silence when ignition was switched off, the banking turn and side slip to lose height, the long, smooth glide ending in a backwater at Fort Smith and, finally, the still ward of the hospital, with black robed Oblate Fathers and the noiseless step of kindly nurses.

When, next day, knowing that a life had been saved, they flew on and landed at the base, Wilding was so silent that Paula, puzzled and a little hurt, betook herself without delay to the Scott bungalow where she received a warm welcome. It was nice to talk to one of her own sort, and soon she was in the middle of her experiences.

"So it was all different from anything you expected?" said Mary with an understanding nod.

"Utterly different and all interesting: I'd no idea

what I'd find, and now I can't imagine it being at all otherwise. Everyone so kind and—in a way dignified. It's rather hard to explain."

"Yes, I think they are: it's what the life makes them. As to that woman, Jack did the only thing—he'd have done it without your father's permission—it isn't unusual, you know; there are lots of what we call 'mercy flights' every year, but not often as simple as that."

"Simple!"

"Of course: we depend so much on our pilots in this country. As for Jack and Rachel Bedell I knew about that from Jim, and there's nothing between them really—certainly nothing on his side."

"You haven't seen that parka."

"What parka?"

Paula explained, and the other girl looked a little thoughtful.

"That makes it rather awkward—coming from her it's equivalent to a proposal of marriage—it's the custom of those people. I didn't know it had gone so far."

"But he can't."

"And won't," smiled Mary, "and I'm sorry for Rachel. Do you and your father go on to Edmonton now?"

Paula looked a shade self-conscious. "May I be frightfully candid?"

"It's the rule of the north, my dear: we don't accept anything else."

"Well, it's like this—I think I've made a discovery."

"Has it blue eyes and fair hair?"

"Certainly not; it has a nose that turns up, too many freckles, and no pretensions to good looks. It's myself."

"Oh."

"I begin to suspect," ruminated Paula, "that I've never quite known her before, and now that I'm commencing I'm not terribly attracted. Her sense of values looks a bit twisted. But I'd find out more about her if she didn't jump straight back into the life she's used to? Understand? It's a sort of experiment in personal psychology."

"Go on, my dear."

Paula made a grimace. "I don't want to go back, because I know exactly what it will be—the same thing over again. Up here—I mean down here—things are a lot more real. I'm not in love with anyone, least of all myself and if I could——"

Mary's heart gave a little leap. "Stay with me for awhile?"

"Oh yes. Could I? Of course, I'd share expenses."

"I wasn't thinking of that at all," said the other girl gently. "I would love to have you, but you mustn't be carried away on impulse. You're new to this kind of life, and perhaps it strikes you as rather romantic, but it isn't. You've had only the pleasant side of it. Your father is President of the

Company and all that, but you—well—you know nothing of its burdens.”

“Please go on.”

“As I’ve said, you’d be more than welcome, and a great treat for me: I’d love having a real visitor, and there’s plenty of room, and the place is interesting enough in a way, even this late in the year, but the weather’s going to change soon, much too soon, and you don’t know what that means to the wife of a pilot. Even Jim doesn’t know what I feel in secret. I’ve never told him.”

She said this so calmly that Paula was stirred. How little she knew about life after all.

“It’s hard to explain,” she answered, brows furrowing as she searched her mind for the right words, “but so far, I have been just on the fringe of things—that is, real things. I’ve had everything I thought I wanted, and accepted it all as a sort of right. I adore my father and he’s always spoiled me, but neither of us have any exact understanding of the other; although we’re the best friends in the world we haven’t really tried each other out. I suppose it’s often like that. I’m twenty and I’m getting on. I suppose, like every other girl, I’ll marry before very long, but first I want to learn how to feel, and that,” she concluded impulsively, “is why I’d love to stay here for awhile if—only if you honestly would like it.”

“My dear, if you’re sure—quite sure—that you can take us as you find us, it would mean much to me. Jim and I would be happy to have you.”

"I'm terribly grateful," said Paula, "and hope you won't find me a nuisance. Where's Mr. Scott?"

"I—I don't really know." Mary looked suddenly grave. "I'd expected you to come back with him as first arranged, then Mr. Sturt told me that plans were changed and Jim was going to Bear Lake and the Coppermine. He did that, and the last we heard was that he left Coronation Gulf two days ago with an Oblate Father and a sick Husky—since then we—we have no word."

Paula, hearing this, felt horribly uncomfortable. "You're anxious?"

"Naturally, though perhaps there's nothing to worry about really. But I can't help it, especially at this time of the year. The weather on the Barrens is uncertain. The base has been calling him since yesterday and—and gets no answer."

Paula felt the blood climbing to her temples, and her throat a little dry.

"Mary, I did that."

"You did what?"

"Arranged that we changed pilots—that is, I persuaded father to have the change made. It's my fault."

Scott's wife looked at her blankly. "But why?"

"I wanted to talk to Jack on the way back. We met him at Aklavik—and—well—I thought I could help."

She got this out bravely enough, but flushing deeply, realising that she was inviting no gentle

response from the wife of the missing pilot. Yet it seemed she had to say it—she must be honest, no matter what the consequence.

"I see." Mary bit her lip, her expression changing, so that fear suddenly lay written on a face usually calm and kind, till suddenly this left her and she sent Paula a quick little smile that was the real reflection of her spartan, uncomplaining self.

"I'm terribly sorry; I had no right to do it, and——" She broke off, realising that if she had not, Wilding might be two days overdue instead of Scott—then with an effort, "I expect it's only a forced landing from engine trouble. We had one on the way up."

"There are several kinds of forced landings," said Mary gently. "Come and see your room."

While she said this, Scott was eight hundred miles to the north, marooned on a naked whale-back of rock in a land of white and black, black where the water was still open under lowering skies, white where snow lay smoothly over the long rocky ridges, ironing their outline into softer curves. It had been like that for two days while a skin of ice still clung to propeller and leading edge. Now it was fringing the naked shore of the island.

Periodically he climbed into the cockpit, switched on, and heard the base calling—calling for answer he could not give. Something wrong with his transmitter, and he sat there, choked, helpless, aware

that the only interpretation of this silence would be that he had crashed. Sturt got on the air himself with messages from Mary quite confident and encouraging at first, but presently tailing out into a voicelessness all too eloquent. It seemed that she must have assumed the worst, and in solitude he suffered no less than herself.

Two days passed, and with the exception of clicking Morse in the cockpit, and harsher tones from grey-backed Arctic wolves patrolling the opposite shore, there was no sound. Also there was no wind, and when this dropped, the cold increased.

Isaluk had ceased to whisper: it was amazing how he still clung to life, looking up at intervals that grew more rare with remote understanding in his black eyes while the framework of his face became more gaunt, and the cheekbones stood out like angular lumps of ivory. At first they had taken alternate watch beside him, but since there was nothing now that might be done for the doomed man, this had fallen mostly to Father Rioux, while Roberts and Scott spent the shortening hours of daylight scanning the skies, where by day and night wedges of geese flew over with trumpeting swans and flights of passage ducks, all winnowing the still air with innumerable wings, for winter was coming to the Barren Lands. Looking up at these speeding flocks that would so soon be hurtling above McMurray gave the three castaways a strange sensation, they themselves being bird men without wings.

The rocky whale-back was two hundred feet long, fifty wide, sharpening to a needle point at either end: there was no wood on it, or driftwood lodged against the shores, but moss grew tightly wedged in the crannies. By the third day they had burned this for cooking, saving their paraffin oil for the primus stove in which they had tried to use lubricating oil; but it would not vaporise, so they treasured the heavier stuff for making a flare by night, or a smoke column in the daytime, by burning soaked waste so soon as a plane came within sight or sound.

On the fourth day Isaluk, without having spoken, died whilst unconscious. They took him, laid him in a crevice in the highest spot of the island, put a ground sheet over him and weighted that down with slabs of loose rock. Rioux knelt beside the body for a long time, hands joined, lips moving, his worn black soutane gathered tight against his body for the day was cold. Then without appearing to notice the others, he got back into the fuselage and spent an hour with his breviary. Scott was poring over his map: he had pencilled in the hitherto undiscovered lake, which by right of occupation he could name as he wished. By his shoulder Roberts said:

"I've an idea that if we disconnected one of those pontoons I might get ashore on it. We've got a paddle."

"And then what?"

"Make for Fort Rae—it can't be more than a hundred and fifty miles, and practically due south."



"Alone?"

"Sure, why not? I'd make a bit of fire every time I came to a lake. I'd take the rifle, and, besides, one's pretty sure to strike some Indians, they'll be on their trap lines now."

"Nothing doing, Bob. It isn't safe to travel this country alone, and you know it. Freeze-up's coming: I guess it's here now. You'd stick half way, if you got that far."

"Grub's getting low, sir: another two days and we're out!"

"I'm painfully aware of that, but they'll pick us up all right. This has happened before: one always gets picked up."

"Pretty rough on Mrs. Scott, sir."

Scott frowned. He had been trying to forget that part of it. "She'll realise it's only a matter of time. Anyway the thing is my mistake: I should have gone back to the Coppermine an hour after we started."

"And most likely have stayed there for the next six weeks," objected Roberts. "I'd sooner take a long chance."

"Perhaps, but we'd have had a wireless station to talk through. I never knew ice build up on a plane like that before, so we'll know better next time. That padre's pretty good stuff, isn't he?"

"You bet. No sign of any wind yet: she's going to freeze hard to-night."

Roberts was right. That afternoon there was a still deeper calm, a sharp drop in temperature, and a faint vapour began to rise from the black water which was now warmer than the air. At sunset this had thickened to a layer of white mist, beneath which the lake lay unstirred, with great floating patches of what looked like finely powdered quartz crystals. Against the island, ice had already formed in the shallows, and through its glassy skin one could see innumerable coloured boulders of all sizes and shapes strewing the shelving bottom. Roberts, who was husbanding paraffin oil in the primus stove, looked a shade grim.

"We could get ashore into the bush if that ice makes an inch thick," said he, "an inch will carry a man if he knows how, and send up a hell of a smoke. Here's your soup, Father."

Rioux smiled at him. Believing himself in the hands of God, he was without any fear, and had become vastly interested in these two. Whether they also believed in God, he did not know, nor had he thought it well to open the subject, for nothing in their manner invited it, but indubitably they were God's children as much as himself, and very wise in a world to which he was a stranger. During twenty years of service down north, he had achieved a latitude not capturable in any monastery, and this now enabled him to see that a whale-back of rock on the edge of the Barrens was not a suitable spot for evangelical efforts directed towards ex-

ceedingly hungry men. He was drinking his soup in silence when Scott said:

"There's this, Father, and it's only fair to tell you. There's one machine out looking for us now, perhaps two, between the Coppermine and Cameron Bay: I got that to-day, but couldn't answer. They think we've crashed somewhere on that line, or not far on either side of it, and I can't tell them that we haven't. That ground will now be white, which makes it more difficult for them to spot anything from the air."

"I understand, my son."

"Well, my mistake was to change my course, so we won't be looked for here at first—not for some days anyway. They can't search the whole North-west Territory. On the other hand, we can't get ashore through ice which is just making—we might stick half-way. Also if the ice goes on making and gets fairly thick, it'll be a job for a machine with pontoons to make a landing without cracking up, but it could drop some grub. We can reckon on that in due course. Finally it may be that we stay here till a plane fitted with skis can take off elsewhere—it all depends whether this cold snap has come to stay. Is that clear?"

"I knew all this, my son," said Rioux quietly. "No, I am not anxious, and when there is anything a priest can do, you will tell me. Also, though I am a large man, I have long trained myself to eat very little—my health is better for it."

## CHAPTER VIII

TWO days later Wilding was in the little office at the base arguing with Sturt, the agent. Birch trees and cottonwoods stood up naked all round them, and on the other side of the back-water a fringe of ice clung to the shore. Word from Fitzgerald reported that ice was making there, but no snow had fallen; at Fort Resolution it had formed a quarter mile out, and Great Bear Lake, the coldest spot of all, was frozen a mile out, with dog teams working along the shore. Meteorologists laid all this early visitation to the appearance of sun-spots.

Sturt felt baffled: not yet had the line lost a passenger, yet here were their best pilot, best engineer and two passengers apparently washed out. It made him truculent. For days past a machine had been combing the Coppermine—Cameron Bay run with no result, and at no little risk: and that machine on floats was now marooned in the north until the snow came and they could get skis under her and send her out. The air had tingled with messages addressed to the voiceless Scott: the Oblate Superior at Fort Smith had sent one to Father Rioux bidding him be of good hope, while Mary Scott had wirelessly that she and James Junior were well and not worrying at all. But had any of these ever been received? It was like broadcasting to another planet.

All the North knew about it: Aklavik knew and Fort Simpson and the Coppermine: Pituluk knew and Rachel Bedell: they all talked of it, hazarding what might have happened. For a few days it had been kept from Mary, then she heard of it in a McMurray store, and came back to Paula and the baby, white-faced.

"You see," she said, talking bravely through crowding fears, "that's what I meant when I said you'd only seen one side of life down here. I wish that Jack was back."

Wilding was away just then making short trips from Fort Reliance on Great Slave Lake, carrying trappers and their dogs a hundred and fifty miles into The Barrens, an hour and a half trip by air, a week every other way in that season of the year. On the return flight he stopped at Fort Resolution where he first heard the news, again at Fort Smith where he picked up a passenger—the last air passenger for a month for McMurray. At once when he heard the news he tackled Sturt. They had been arguing, when he leaned on the desk and revolted.

"Yes, yes, I know all about that, but I'm not going to sit here and wait. Jim wouldn't if he were in my place."

"There are things that neither of you can do at this time of year"; Sturt pointed to the congealing backwater. "You know what that means farther north—you certainly ought to."

"I know what it generally means. Look here, to hell with regulations, I'm going."

"Where?" asked Sturt acidly, for he was sore at heart.

"I think this——" Wilding was now speaking with intense earnestness. "I think Jim hasn't crashed at all—I can't see him crashing, he's too clever at his job. He's made a forced landing—like we all do. How was the wind when he left Coppermine?"

"Pretty near due west—a little north of west—about thirty miles an hour at a thousand feet and probably more higher up. It got stronger later."

"Any snow? We didn't have any in the Barrens."

"Some flurries—the weather was spotty, generally speaking."

"Well, assume that, assume, too, that wind and snow got worse and he just couldn't make Cameron Bay, then had to do one of two things, either turn back—mind you, if it was snowing he couldn't be sure of finding the Coppermine—or else try a short cut over the Yellowknife country straight for Fort Rae."

"Not with a sick man; he'd turn back. He hadn't fuel enough to make Fort Rae."

"But he might if the wind pulled into the north—also we know he didn't turn. Don't you see? He's been forced off his line. Maybe he struck south to make better speed thinking to find clear

weather and well—didn't find it. And," he added thoughtfully, "maybe he got ice on his wings."

"Yes, I know, all quite possible," admitted Sturt still unconvinced, "but that doesn't get you anywhere. If you start now, you'll get frozen in yourself, one missing machine at a time is enough in this business. They cost thirty-five thousand apiece."

"I'm next in seniority to Jim."

"What of it? Your Junker will be up on the bank to-morrow for overhaul."

"Not by a damn sight; if I get fired it's no matter." Wilding's face looked oddly older and flattened. "Bob, it's make or break this time. I'm going north."

Sturt had a moment of vacillation. He knew what this young man felt because he felt it all himself, knew that between him and Scott was a bond of peculiar strength, knew that Wilding was exactly the right sort to go off on so perilous a venture, and neither he nor Booster were married. Nothing would have had more appeal to the agent than to take the job into his own hands—for he could fly well. But he had his orders.

"Thanks for the tip," said Wilding grinning. "I'll wire old Deming, pronto."

A little later, looking a trifle dramatic in Rachel's parka, he presented himself at Mary's bungalow. It was a week since he had left the place to work from Fort Reliance into the Barrens, and it felt

good to be back, but now he read the silent tragedy in Mary's eyes.

"Hullo, you two," he said cheerfully, "guess where I've been?"

"Where?" Paula brightened at once, though she recognised the parka he wore.

"Flying dogs into the trapping grounds to save the dogs' time. Think of a high grade pilot hired to save a yellow dog's time."

Mary mustered a smile. The sight of him had heartened her a little; of course he knew, but he looked happy and confident and the ache in her breast was eased for a moment.

"From Reliance?"

He nodded. "You see," he went on to Paula, "we land those fellows, dogs and outfits, just where they are going to set their traps—cheap, quick and certain, like factory work. They'll be out on their lines to-day. By the way, I heard from your father half an hour ago."

"Why so? I haven't heard for a week."

"I wanted to take a joy ride into the Yellowknife country. There were certain official difficulties here, and Sturt stubborn as a mule, so I thought it better to go straight to the Supreme Court."

"Bless you for that, Jack," said Mary, unsteadily.

"That's all right, my dear, and it's all fixed. I'm taking off right away. You see, Paula," he went on, avoiding those grateful eyes, "Mr. James Scott, of whom you know, has been delayed not



so very far from here, and needs a leg up. He and Roberts and their passengers are most likely eating their heads off in some place they can't get out of without a touch of help. It's a waste of time and money—the company can't afford that kind of thing—and I hate waste of any kind. I'm a trifle disappointed in him, and will tell him so. Steady, Mary, steady, old girl; there's nothing to worry about yet."

Mary gave her head a little shake, made an odd noise in her throat and gulped. So many things there were for which she had no words.

"You've got everything you need?" she asked jerkily.

"Being a youth of simple tastes, my needs are few, but," he patted his chest, "what do you think of this garment?"

"It's—it's very imposing."

"Privately, if not modestly, I think I'm the best dressed man in McMurray to-day," then wickedly, "what's your opinion, Paula?"

"I told you what I thought," said she flushing, "but I'm glad—well, glad it fits."

"Thanks a lot. This parka," he explained, winking at Mary, "didn't cost the young lady who made it anything but the value of the fur and the time she spent on it in spite of what any super-sophisticated person may imagine."

"I didn't imagine anything of the kind," exploded Paula, "I think you're horrid."

"Yes, I know. Well, it's going to keep me warm for the next day or two anyway. Ta-ta, Miss Deming. By-bye, Mary; we'll have that neglectful man of yours back in no time, when you might ask me to supper if Paula doesn't object. I'll be hungrier than a wolverine. Good luck and behave yourselves."

That was all: he went off quickly, joining Booster, who was already on the bush road to the base, a pack on his back.

"Loaded those extra bedrolls?"

"Yes."

"Brandy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Hypodermics?"

"Mr. Sturt has it all ready."

"Sent a line to your girl?"

"To all of 'em, sir."

Wilding glanced at the grey sky. "Tom," he said, "you and I are in for one hell of a trip."

"I don't figure it'll be so bad."

"Bless you for them good words. Why?"

"Mosquitoes all quit some time ago, sir."

In the bungalow was a pool of silence, the work in Mary's lap had become a confused blur of coloured wool, her fingers fumbled and trembled, her heart was bursting. She felt Paula's gaze, then looked up with a strange expression.

"Do you remember something I said when you told me you'd like to stay here for awhile?"

"I've been thinking of that, too."

"Does it need any explanation, now?"

"No."

"I had to prepare you for something of this kind, but I didn't count on it coming so soon."

"You expected it?"

"One expects everything and nothing. That's the philosophy of life with us: it may be humdrum for months, then suddenly without warning the thing happens. A woman's part—what she can do—is so small; she can only love her man, making him happy and comfortable when he is with her, and do nothing to weaken him. What she admires most about him is courage; while his skill and nerve is for other people to use, not herself. She's always surrendering him to the air when she seems to need him most. Does that all sound like a bit of heroics?"

"No, you're perfectly splendid, and I feel like a worm."

"Hm!" Mary smiled a little. "A very disturbing sort of worm I'd say. So would Jack."

"For Mr. John Wilding I simply do not exist," sniffed Paula. "It's rather a queer sensation. Also he's been excessively rude."

"Really—you mean that?"

"Yes, really, and I've reason to remember it. It's Rachel."

"No, my dear, not Rachel, or ever will be: it wouldn't work at all, and he knows it."

"He didn't speak like that when we were talking

the night we made a forced landing on that lake: he practically told me to mind my own business."

"Who brought the matter up?"

"I suppose I did."

"Why?" asked Mary gently.

"I couldn't just sit still and—well, watch that sort of thing going on," explained the girl, aware that this sounded distinctly forced, "and I knew he wouldn't be happy and—er—it seemed such a pity—pity for them both," she added largely. "I was thinking of her just as much as of him: I like her very much."

"That's all he said?"

"Then he told me that I'd a lot to learn, and it was coldest just before dawn, and I'd better go to bed—I mean get into my bed roll."

"And since then?"

"He's avoided me: he hasn't been exactly rude, but made me feel that he is not in the least interested and I hate that."

"What would you suppose to be the biggest thing in Jack's life?"

"I haven't the faintest idea—unless it's Rachel."

"No, it's the air. My Jim is like that—all good pilots are. Their wives, if they have any, may come next as I do, but must be content with that. I had to learn my lesson; at first it was hard to see Jim go off so happily with no question at all in his mind about me when he was away. That end of it was my affair, and I saw it was part of my job to send

him off every time without a care in his mind except for his work. When he gets into his plane, everything else in the world becomes secondary. That's one thing that makes a good pilot, and one reason why most flying companies prefer single men. They are free of ground cares, Paula. If you saw Jim chuck me under the chin before he took off you might misread him. And me too. A pilot mustn't have daydreams about a home and wife and children under a low ceiling with poor visibility. You've flown enough now to know what I mean, and these are some of the reasons I don't want you to misinterpret Jack."

"Go on," said Paula curiously.

"Well, of course, he was bluffing just now; he knows and I know too that he is taking his life in his hands. I believe he'll find Jim, but he may not: I believe he'll come back, but he may not. No machine is supposed to be in the air for the next two or three weeks anyway. It may not be able to land with safety. So you see what this friendship means, and Jim, married though he is, would do exactly the same thing if the affair was reversed, and I wouldn't dream of objecting. And that," she concluded wistfully, "is part of what it means to be a pilot's wife."

Wilding who had thrust McMurray and all it contained out of his thoughts, found it cold at two thousand feet, but clear so far, and he

could see the land unrolling league after silent league, turning up all round at the horizon as though he were flying over a gigantic saucer. He held the Junker's nose on the northerly edge and flew on. The ground was white when he reached Great Slave Lake; he fuelled at Resolution, then came down in a little bay where the ice had not yet made, anchoring a hundred yards out from a rocky shore.

He and Booster entertained no illusions concerning this venture; it being at variance with ordinary flying conditions. They might be away four days or four weeks; in consequence the plane had been provisioned accordingly. On either side of the Mackenzie the earth was bitten by early frost, and in the great surrounding swamps the endless dark lagoons were closed. Not enough snow in the woods for shoeing, and not enough ice on the lakes to carry a man, so it behoved him to cling to open water as long as he might.

To-night, safely anchored, he spread a map on the fuselage floor and studied it closely. There was no sound except the lap of water around the floats. Finally he drew a pencil circle.

"They're inside that if anywhere."

"Why?" asked Booster.

"It's this: Peterson reports from Cameron Bay that they are not within a thirty mile strip that lies between Great Bear and the Coppermine."

"Then he didn't see any smoke?"

"No, but that doesn't mean they've cracked up:

it means they're south of that strip for the wind was north of west."

"You can see smoke a long way, sir."

"I know it, but"—here something clicked in Wilding's brain—"supposing they had to make a forced landing where there was no fuel. That's likely in the Barrens."

"But you can burn moss or lubricating oil."

"Then assume there wasn't any moss. As for the oil, if the weather was thick who'd see the smoke. Damn it, Booster, those fellows are on an island."

"It's all the same to me, sir, where they are, but there are a hell of a lot of islands in the Barrens."

"I know it, but if the weather keeps clear we've got enough fuel to do a hell of a lot of flying. What's the temperature now?"

"Twenty-four degrees, sir."

"Uh! Well, good night."

Snow began to fall next day when they were half-way over Great Slave Lake, fine and powdery from a cloud layer at two thousand feet. Wilding climbed through it and looked down at a rolling expanse that reached as far as he could see without a break, glorified by a brilliant sun that sent glancing shafts of light into these unfathomable depths. He estimated the layer at one thousand feet thick, and it was much colder up here. His present position he reckoned to be five hundred miles in an air line

due south from the mouth of the Coppermine. It was a new country to him. There were no settlements, no mining camps, and so far as they had gone, no sign of any Indian villages.

He flew on, diving at times through the cloud layer seeking the earth, but not finding it, mounting abruptly to upper regions and the welcome sun, but there was a limit to this, and in two hours he must land to re-fuel from reserves carried in the fuselage. Likening himself to a tiring bird that could find no perch, he leaned over towards Booster.

"We're about heading for the site of Old Fort Enterprise. Anyone there now?"

"Maybe a few Yellowknife Indians."

"No Post?"

"Nope: it's been closed for years—not trade enough to pay."

"On Point Lake, isn't it?"

"No, as I remember it was south of that, but after the first few hundred you can't tell these bloody lakes apart."

"Ever been there, Booster?"

"Nope."

"I have an idea you're going now if we get out of this."

For answer Booster put his finger on the wind-screen where ice had formed in patches. "Watch that," he grunted, "the middle one. Give me the stick, sir."



Wilding gave it and watched: slowly the patch was changing outline, it became a little blurred, less opaque, and from its lower edge trickled a drop.

"It's thawing now," grunted the mechanic. "Here, sir, you take her."

He was right: the wind also was changing, and through caves of air came a milder breath from the south while simultaneously the cloud layer began to dissolve, showing great gaps and ragged rifts with no flying snow below so that the earth was once more visible, the dear, familiar earth. As by the sweep of a vast broom the atmosphere was gradually evacuated of all save sunshine. Now they could see rivers, ice fringed lakes and islands, belts of timber and the low granite ridges characteristic of the Yellowknife country. Wilding could have yelped with relief.

"That cold snap was a bluff—squaw's winter!" He looked at his watch. "We'll go on for another hour, we've fuel enough to do us—it's getting warmer all the time. God, what's that?"

He pointed north. On the horizon was a spot, dark against the sky, black against the endless counterpane of white: it ascended, hung, increased, then dwindled to be followed a moment later by another: no wood smoke could be as black as that.

"Fuel oil and nothing else, sir. Let's open her up a bit."

Wilding, jerking the throttle wide open, felt a

little drunk. In fifteen minutes he was over Whale-bank Island, dipped a wing, banked, went into a reckless sideslip, and dropped like a wounded gull. Flattening out he brought the nose of the Junker close to shore and then, strangely, the divine satisfaction of the moment passed, and the world became almost drab. The tension was over and he yielded to the numbing nostalgia of success.

There stood Scott as though nothing unusual were happening, with Roberts, his hands in his pockets, and the big priest who had been a familiar figure at Coppermine: they stood there nodding, certainly smiling a little, but nothing more, and it wasn't till he got ashore that he saw how weather-worn they looked.

"Hello, Jim. Good-day, Father."

"Hello, pilot, we've been expecting you. What sort of a trip?"

"Lousy at first. Then okay."

"Ice on your wings?"

"You've said it. Want a cigarette?"

Booster immediately began to heat something on the primus stove, and with no outward sign of it was intensely interested. This flight though accorded but brief mention in the news of the company, would not be forgotten in the north. He was now talking in a lowered voice with Roberts, making mental photographs of the place—a hell of a place, he reckoned it, the damndest, barest island he'd ever seen, not even moss in the cracks.

"We were burning it with lubricating oil," explained Roberts, "making smoke. Started that four days ago. The Husky passed out on the second day here. That's him under the ground sheet. Cold as hell it was without a fire. We started to fish when the grub ran out, but the trout are in the deep water—we couldn't reach that. Scott shot a goose on the wing with a rifle, but we couldn't get at it. Something pulled it down—I guess it was a big pike. We could hear the base calling us, talking to Coppermine and Cameron Bay—Sturt seemed to have the wind up. Picked up quite a lot of messages. Last night we knew you'd started. That priest is pretty good stuff too. Well, here's luck."

Scott gulping steaming soup, felt a new warmth in his blood, now chilled for days past. He felt a little queer and light-headed.

"How are things at McMurray, Jack?"

"Okay; I saw Mary yesterday morning. She's fine and the kid."

"That's good."

"The Deming girl's staying with her for a while."

"Oh! Why?"

"It would be pretty slow for Mary alone, and they like each other all right."

"That's good. Got some spare gas?"

"Enough to take us both to Fort Rae. Like to push off now?"

"I guess so."

"Hi, Booster, gas up Mr. Scott's machine, will you? Say, Jim, what about that Husky?"

Scott turned to the Oblate. "What about it, Father?"

The priest had been watching the two with profound interest: his French blood responded to the stark drama of the scene, and he admired these men intensely, but could not quite understand their attitude. Did they feel anything at all? Now he got up and stood silent for a moment beside the loaded ground sheet. Then he made the sign of the cross.

"I think," he said, "it is well that we leave him here, for it is most near to his own country. But let us first put on some more stones, bigger ones, to save him from the foxes."

Within the half hour the two metal birds were in the air: beneath them the north stretched its gigantic framework under a bright and warming sun as though in one last luxurious yawn before stiffening to a long winter rigidity. It was a good flight home. Mary and Paula were at the landing stage when Scott got out a bit stiffly and turned to Wilding.

"Thanks, pilot."

"That's all right."

Wilding walked off alone. He found it coolish in his bungalow so soon got the fire going, then sat bunched up staring at the crackling stove, still suffering from that strange depression. He was a fool, foolish to think what it would be like to have a girl meet him as Mary had met Jim, with the same look

in her eyes, to come back to a warm house, shut the door, be at home with one's girl, find a steaming bath ready, perhaps a kid with its fair little arms stretched out, and a thousand damn fool small things that didn't amount to very much but taken altogether made a hell of a lot of difference. And after the bath and dinner and playing with the kid to go to sleep with his head on his girl's shoulder and forget about forced landings, ice on one's wings, and everything else. That's what Rachel was aching to give him. Then a knock at his door.

"Who the devil's there?"

"It's me," said a small voice.

"I can't help that. Come in, though I'm not dressed for visitors. Well, well, here we are again."

"I'll come in if you'll be reasonably polite, if it's not asking too much." Paula had a pink spot on either cheek.

"We'll do our best without waiting for a bath. To what may I attribute this honour?"

"Please don't begin like that, and you certainly do need a bath. Mary says you're expected there as soon as possible."

"Thanks, but having no desire to infringe on a family reunion, I'm going over to the hotel. Perhaps I'll drop in later."

"Jack."

"Yes, lady."

"That hurts; please don't. Mary would take it very hard, and—and you said you were coming."

"Did I? When?"

"Before you left. We've been getting ready for it ever since, and I've baked my first cake—it looks awful, so please, please don't talk like that. Mary just doesn't know how to express what she feels and I—well, I don't know either."

"I didn't think that Miss Deming ever felt anything in particular," said he lightly.

"I'm beginning to—now."

The change in her voice touched him in a queer way, penetrating his unreasonable sense of revolt, and for an instant his armour was loosened. She was a decent sort after all, and he confessed to being a trifle boorish while she was more than polite. But this passed as speedily as it came.

"Well," he conceded, "thanks very much, and I'll be over presently. Mary had better keep her eye on Jim; he was coughing pretty hard when we struck that island of his."

"I'll tell her."

The door closed: he surveyed the untidiness of the room with an indifferent eye; mukluks kicked into the corner; Rachel's parka in a mound on the floor; cigarette stubbs, a leather helmet on a chair back, stove wood stacked in a metal pail, two battered armchairs, a bulging bed roll tied with cord. Dusk had come and across the bush road he could see a pink glow through Mary's curtains. It looked warm and comfortable.

The bath restored him: he steamed for a while,

shaved, put on a blue suit and went over, finding Mary very quiet and happy with that wonderful look still in her eyes. The kid was fine, sitting up and crowing. Scott also quiet, with a curiously hollow look about his cheeks and coughing a good deal: Paula rather silent, her manner suggesting that she realised she was only a visitor and not really a partner in this reunion of which nothing whatever was said.

Wilding was his old vagarious, unsentimental self again, talking more than any of the others and expressing bland surprise when Mary said that she had persuaded Paula to stay for some weeks longer, and wondering why the girl should want to camp here with the real freeze-up due any day now.

"It's really for experience," explained Paula; "I'm beginning to learn a little, but mostly because I've found the friend of my life at the end of this table. Also she says it'll take the two of us to keep Jim in bed, and she needs help. Later, if I'm good, Jim says he'll fly me down to Aklavik; I want to see the Arctic in winter."

"The courage of ignorance," smiled Scott. "Here's to you, pilot."

He lifted his glass; Wilding meeting the look in those calm grey eyes did the same. There was a little silence, and something flashed round that table too deep to be put into words. A rare moment.

"Good luck old man."

Later there was the inevitable reaction: when Mary switched on the radio and Tauber's voice came in clear, singing in London. She murmured something and went into the little room she used as a nursery. Scott choked back his coughing. Paula was staring into the open fire, fingers locked in her lap. Her expression had that strange aspect of revelation which sometimes touches the young whereby in their faces may be read a forecast of transition, a coming change, a pre-vision of the complete woman hidden under the smooth exterior of youth.

"There won't be much doing here for a while now except to overhaul," said Scott.

"Not much," agreed the younger man. "I think I'll try a week or so in Edmonton and get civilized."

Paula unlocked her fingers and got up. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I find to-day a little—well, arduous. Do you mind if I go to bed? Good night, you two."

"Nice girl that," ruminated Scott. "Mary's been talking about her, and thinks she's good stuff."

"I guess she's all right."

"It isn't usual for one of her sort to want to spend the freeze-up in a place like this."

"Why shouldn't she?—probably fed up at home."

"Possibly for the same reason she switched me off to the Coppermine with unexpected results."

"Jim, you're a damned old fool."

"All right, pilot, leave it at that, but watch your step. You're under observation."



"I'd sooner marry Rachel," said Wilding, knowing that he lied.

"May I tell Rachel that the next time I'm there?"

"Tell her anything you please. Did you wire Aklavik about that Husky?"

"Father Rioux wired the Oblate Mission. It's all right. I'm sorry for Pit. It's odd, you know, but he knew all about it beforehand."

The younger man heaved himself up, stretched and yawned. "I'm for twelve uninterrupted hours on a solitary pillow, unharassed by women and their devious ways. That's the life. You'd better get to bed and stay there. See you to-morrow. Good night."

"Good night, pilot. Much obliged for benefits received."

"Forget it."

Scott listened to the retreating steps and joined his wife: his arm went round her and they looked down at the slumbering James Scott, junior, with his round pink face and his tiny clenched fists, a pugnacious cast on his miniature countenance.

"Determined looking little beggar, isn't he?"

She nodded, leaning back, her head against his shoulder.

"Isn't he? and getting so strong. Jim, it's—well—you know what it is to feel you're here again."

"It's great, isn't it? But we weren't in so much of a hole after all—only a matter of waiting, and I reckoned Jack would pick us up."

"How about him and Paula. I think she's in love."

"She didn't like the idea of his going off to Edmonton anyway, but whether she'd knuckle down to being a pilot's wife is another matter. It's only asking for trouble, isn't it? Come on, dear one, I'm half asleep."

## CHAPTER IX

ALREADY winter had its grip on Aklavik. Down the middle of the Mackenzie a lane remained open, but through the delta where multiple streams mingled with the salt water no lane was visible. Some snow had fallen, enough to make fairly good going in the open, though not sufficient to blur the harsh structural outlines of that lonely settlement. To the north the distance lost itself, but in the west the Richardson Mountains, a fugitive range of the Rockies, seemed to draw nearer in the sharp air that minimised distance. The cotton woods were thin against the sky, on the opposite shore the spruce stood darkly solid along the low clay bank, a beaten trail was established from the Oblate School to the Anglican Mission Hospital, while other trails curved at random towards the bush. The Huskies, all except Pituluk, had scattered to hunt white foxes along the Beaufort Sea, and Father Ladine was already in the foothills killing caribou, whose carcasses he would draw with his dog team to the Oblate larder. Only a few hours of daylight now, then the flamboyant Aurora straddling the zenith with gigantic streamers and festoons of yellow, red and green.

Whitson, on duty from noon to midnight, was at the key desk and in touch with the world when

McMurray came in crisply with news of Scott's return. Father Rioux desired that his safe arrival be conveyed to the Oblate Superior, also that the Eskimo Pituluk be informed of his brother's death in the Yellowknife country, where he now lay safe from any animal.

Whitson took this down with relief. For days past he had been intercepting radio instructions to Great Bear Lake and the Coppermine: he knew, as they all did, about Scott's disappearance and Wilding's desperate flight. The thing had happened before, with the same fortunate result, but it was good to get the official truth. Now he heard the barking of dogs, and peering through frosted window could see a team tearing back from the delta with Rachel running behind. When she came opposite he went out and beckoned.

"Come in a minute—there's a bit of news for you. Those two machines are back all right with no one hurt, but Isaluk died soon after Jim's forced landing. No details. I think you'd better tell Pit."

She stood for a moment, dark eyes shining like live coals, breast heaving, a flush creeping over her olive cheeks, and never, thought Whitson, had a woman in Arctic dress looked so vitally desirable. The team were on their bellies in the snow panting.

"Jack's all right?" said she quickly.

"Sure he's all right. I can't tell you any more now, but more'll come through in the course of to-day. What about Pit?"

"Pit knew."

"Knew what?"

"After Jim started from here for the Coppermine Pit told me what would happen—not the forced landing, but Isaluk's death. Also he said it would be on an island. You see if it isn't."

"I wouldn't be surprised." Whitson knew the north well enough to know that there were many things about it he would never understand. "Where is he now?"

"On his trap lines in the delta—he'll be back to-night. I'll tell him. Anything else?"

"Operator at McMurray told me that Miss Deming didn't go home with her father, and she's staying with Jim's wife."

"Oh!" It was an abrupt sound; the light in her face faded, then, almost brusquely: "What a queer thing to do at this time of the year. Has the ice taken there yet?"

"It's making now. No more planes here for a while."

"Coming over this evening?"

"Thanks, I'd like to."

She turned away silently, followed by the dogs, and he looked after her with a sort of compassion: they were excellent friends; he alone in Aklavik knew how deep lay her love for Wilding, and how that slight strain of native blood intensified the passion she could not proclaim.

Rachel, divided between relief and apprehension,

fed her dogs, tossing each a dried fish, lit the lamps, stirred up the stoves and gave herself to thought. She felt frightened. She had not feared much for Wilding when she heard by the local broadcast he had set out to find Scott because she understood what he faced and something assured her that he would come back. He was too young to die yet—even in the north. But she feared Paula; and now by long distance telepathy she groped as it were for Paula's heart and read what lay there.

Whitson had been right in his explanation of her spontaneous hospitality. Recognising a potential rival, she had wanted to explore Paula, to estimate her, and try to interpret that something in speech and manner and atmosphere which she herself would give anything to achieve. This was no aiming at imitation, but a pathetic secret craving than which to confess she would have preferred to die. On her own ground here in the north she could more than hold her own with any living woman, but did her dream come true she would live amongst whites, amongst other Paulas, and her woman's instinct warned her what she might expect from other women. They weren't like the men. She knew many men—but the women she had met could be counted on her fingers. She was a little nervous with women, but never with men.

Isaluk! She must tell Pituluk what had happened. It was queer about that, yet to her not unintelligible. It wasn't the "moccasin telegraph" but something

like it, an odd prescience or coincident perception; perhaps a gift to certain simple minds in the wilderness whereby they had a foresight and awareness of distant happenings. She had seen it illustrated on the Peel River when a Louchoux conjurer foretold to a day the coming of three white men a month before they arrived. Perhaps it had something to do with the reason why Pituluk would never hunt in the bush. The trees, he argued, always talked to him.

Her mind moved back to Paula, and whilst it dwelt there she experienced the odd conviction that she and this girl would surely meet again 'ere long, than which nothing was more unlikely, when she herself would be on her trap lines before the week was out.

Now Pituluk would be back from the delta, so she started for his winter home, passing on the way the shack Domert had built for himself before the snow came. He had not spoken to her again, but somehow made friends with Louis, and would sit in his store chatting for hours about places in Quebec which he knew very well. He talked good French which pleased Louis exceedingly.

There was light in Pituluk's house, a patchwork affair built of split logs stood on end with the split side out: the walls leaned a little inwards, Husky fashion, so that later the deepening snow would bank up all round giving additional warmth, whereas were these walls vertical like a white man's house the ground would be bare all winter on the lee side.

Approaching she heard voices, much laughter and yelps of pain, so halted at the single window and looked in.

The hut was crowded: on an empty tin sat Pituluk next to a small sheet iron stove with Oomgah's copper-coloured head firmly gripped between his knees. The head was bent back, extending the round full neck, her mouth was wedged wide open by a short piece of wood, while Pituluk's sharp eyes explored the red recesses within. At his elbow stood the portable drill, its pedal vigorously operated by a second woman who with others and Pituluk's children watched the proceedings with fascinated interest. On the floor arranged in ordered rows lay the dent collection accumulated during Ingalls' visit to Aklavik. They had been sorted, cleaned and polished.

Rachel choked back the laughter in her throat and understood perfectly, for was it not the duty of every Husky wife to chew to softness the edges of the sole pieces of hide of the bearded seal that they might be attached to the thin uppers of the mukluk, or Husky boot. Was it not essential that for this connubial office the hunter's partner have sound teeth and know how to use them. Was it not admitted along the coast of the Beaufort Sea that her conjugal value was largely gauged by the performance of her jaws, now, after years of faithful mastication, reduced to a few worn and rusty fangs whose productive days were nearly over.



Pituluk had thought deeply over this. Being a noted hunter and man of means he could without difficulty procure a new wife, a young one possessed of a mouthful of sound teeth, a shining galaxy that would serve him well for years to come, but deep in his heart was faithfulness to his first love, and if a little ingenuity on his part, aided by the white man's contrivances, could refurnish her with a few simple essentials he still preferred her to any other woman. That is what moved in his mind during the motionless hours while he watched Ingalls at work.

He peered again, seized the drill and indifferent to squirms thrust its whirring point into the gaping mouth. In this long torture he was preparing a hole for a new tooth, and while it went on he visioned himself a professional dental surgeon, a man of reputation in demand along the coast from Barrow Point to Coronation Gulf. Many another hunter, he knew, was faced with a predicament similar to his own. He would be of service to his own people, no less welcome than the white doctor to whom they appealed in time of need, but whereas that doctor took no money, he, Pituluk, proposed to make his own terms.

With this bright future in mind he applied himself vigorously to the affair in hand. His first patient was a free one—but what matter.

Rachel knocked and went in. Pituluk nodded and grinned, while Oomgah, escaping his knees, wiped the blood from her lips. She quite understood the

purpose of her suffering, felt no resentment, and realised it was the price of devotion that she was glad to pay.

"This thing that I bought is very good," said the Husky triumphantly. "It makes a hole very quick and not too large. Does it happen that your teeth are also in trouble?"

Rachel shook her head gravely: she knew these children of the north so well, knew the depth of their affections and that she was about to inflict pain.

"No, my teeth are not yet sick, and soon I go on the trap lines. How long will Pituluk be in Aklavik?"

"Not for long: in a little while I travel from place to place towards King William Land taking this with me": his fingers curved over the drill. "Also it is in my mind that there is much to be done. Were my brother Isaluk in Coronation Gulf," he added in an odd tone, "I should go there."

"Where is he?"

Pituluk's eyes grew cloudy. "I am waiting to know that before I go. In my dreams I have seen him, but all was not well."

"You believe in those dreams?"

He hesitated and silence fell in the little room while the other adults looked at him soberly, for this was a strange question. Why did dreams come if not to be believed by humans?

"This was not a good one as I think I told you. In it I saw my brother asleep on a small island with a raven on his breast, and he did not wake up."

"That was a true dream," said Rachel gently, "he will never wake up any more."

Great tears were slowly forming in the corners of his black eyes, they escaped and slid down, he did not speak, he had become a statue, a tawny block of weeping stone.

"A true dream," she repeated, "and the story of it has come through the air." Then she told him. "And," she concluded, "you must not be unhappy for the foxes and wolverines can never reach the thing that was your brother. He is quite safe. When again Mr. Scott comes to Aklavik you will hear the rest of it."

Pituluk made no sound: he sat there and began to rock his body slowly to right and left, his gaze blank, in a sort of harmonic rhythm, as though yielding to the sway of invisible forces outside.

He had loved Isaluk with the deep love that man has for the brother of his blood, but did not now protest, for was it not always like this from the beginning, life and death, death and life, with only a step or a moment between the two, and nothing to indicate the direction from whence either might come. Why therefore complain to-day? So all the more did he want to move away from Aklavik and travel to less familiar scenes.

Winter came to the north as a pale ghost might caress a prostrate giant. The dark lane down the Mackenzie narrowed and closed, the bare

ice was smothered in a powdery fleece, along high clay banks the conical spruce stood in suddenly halted ranks, piles of cordwood were transformed into glittering mounds, and further under the green canopy of laden branches the surface bore myriad imprints of small feet of slayer and slain. The black bear was asleep till April breathed down from the south, ducks, geese and swans long since had fled away, and winnowing through the stillness throbbed only the ragged wings of the ivory-beaked raven.

Bear Lake was solid amongst its silver-laden hills. From Barrow Point to Richard Island, from Franklin Point to Coronation Gulf the sea ice had made; pressure ridges rumbled across its glistening plain and the egg-topped domes of igloos gathered above shoals where the fishing was good. Along the coast Husky hunters set traps for the white fox, baiting them with offal from stranded whales. In the bush along glistening lanes and by-ways of straight round trunks, and beside congealed water-courses, white trappers, Yellowknives, Dogribs, Louchoux and Rabbitskin Indians caught mink and marten, otter and ermine, and, rarely, a silver fox.

Through this wilderness men travelled from outpost to outpost breaking trail for their straining dogs. The stumps in clearings bore gigantic crowns, huge mushroom tops that collapsed at the lash of a whip. The streams meandered invisibly through the woods, the waterfalls were stiff stalactites, the swamps were highways for beast and man. Out in the Barrens,

wandered herds of caribou, their innumerable feet muffled in the drifts they scraped from the rich grey moss on which they lived, and on the sea ice roamed the male white bear, while the female paced in darkness in an alley-way between cliff and snow-bank till later, mad with hunger, she would emerge lean and ravenous with the cub born in solitude.

Daylight made compromise with the Arctic night in a truce that was neither day nor night, and men's shadows stretched far to the North. At times the heavens were ablaze with a palpitating curtain of yellow, red and green through which pulsed swiftly currents and waves of mysterious intensity, while the edge of this pendulous curtain swept the sea-ice, tinting the pressure ridges with ghostly hues. The stark air stung men's skins, but warmed their blood till they rejoiced in the ardour and taste of life.

Louis was in his store, warm and comfortable. He regarded his shelves with satisfaction anticipating a good season, and already fur was coming in well. As a small independent trader, he was always dependent on the Hudson's Bay Company because his stuff could come down only on *The Distributor*, but there was no cause for complaint. They treated his shipments as they did their own, also the Post Manager at Aklavik was a decent sort, could be depended upon not to cut prices, and Louis could even buy stuff there at white man's figures when his own stock had run too low. There was no trouble about that.

But against this commercial calm lay the ragged edge of unsatisfied desire. He loved Rachel, he felt all the affinity and understanding that his race always experiences for those of her wild blood. He knew that he could make her happy, that his people in Trois Rivières would welcome her, and he recognised in her a hidden furnace that would keep him warm for the rest of his life.

He was thinking about this one night when Domert entered, subsided into a chair, and proffered one of his inexhaustible red-banded cigars. No one in Aklavik except himself smoked cigars. The man looked a little reckless, and Louis, shaking his head, smelt liquor.

"I guess not to-night, my pipe she's good enough. Where you been these last few days? Dites-moi?"

"Building a shack about forty miles out," said Domert dropping into French.

"What are you going to do there?"

"Nothing much, perhaps a bit of trading, I never spent winter in the bush."

"The only fur you'll get there is what you trap yourself," said Louis, wondering what was behind all this.

"Well, it don't matter much, I'll find something anyway." He took out a flask. "Have a drink? No? Well, here's luck."

The visitor spoke as a man to whom time meant little and, reflected Louis, no one really knew why he had come to Aklavik. Everyone else was busy,

established, with a practical reason for existence, but this stranger seemed altogether casual. He must have money or he wouldn't be here. If he became destitute the police would ration him and when navigation opened send him out on *The Distributor*. If he was a fugitive, there could be no escape unless he got over the Alaska Boundary. On the other hand, here was someone to talk to in one's own tongue and Domert's French was purer than Louis' patois.

"I want some stuff, mon vieux," said he a shade thickly with a glance at the burdened shelves. "Some of mine didn't arrive—too late at McMurray. I want snow-shoes, a good rifle—the best you've got, and cartridges. Let us get busy. Can you find me a dog team? I've got to have one—a good one."

This was good business; Louis, brightening, began to collect things, piling them on the floor near the stove. No tinned stuff except milk, with flour, dried apples, tea, baking powder, soda, syrup, sugar. He forked out a pair of shoes and Domert tested their springy webbing of moosehide. The pile grew, with no prices asked, and he conceived a certain respect for this affluent customer. When it came to the rifle, Domert chose the latest model Winchester 30-30; he balanced this, put it to his shoulder, cuddling a cheek against the glossy stock, and looked very much at home. When he snapped the trigger, Louis observed that he did not pull with the forefinger as do men unaccustomed to a gun, but pressed finger

and thumb together—which was significant. Then small, heavy boxes of nested cartridges. When it came to the dog team, Louis said that there were no dogs for sale in Aklavik, but he would ask Pituluk who might find some on the Delta, though they would be hard to find and cost money at this time of year, perhaps three hundred dollars for a fair team, at which he sent Domert a dubious look. Domert intimated that price didn't matter, he wanted the damned dogs at any price, and perhaps Pituluk, the only Husky left in Aklavik in the meantime, could tote his stuff out to the shack for him. Then he took from his hip pocket a roll of notes and stripped one off.

"Got any change?" he asked carelessly.

Louis' eyes rounded. The note was for five hundred dollars, clean, crisp, and he made a gesture of dismay.

"Mon Dieu! do you think I am made of——"

A sound behind them, a breath of cold air, and Rachel stood in the door shaking the snow from the fringed hood of her parka, her eyes fixed on the extended note. Then she laughed.

"Bon soir, Louis, you do good business to-night, eh?" She nodded quite amicably to Domert and came forward. Neither of the men spoke at once, and she stood there, eyes very bright, glancing from one to the other in a sort of high-spirited independence, till Louis pointed to the note.

"Bon soir, chérie, I'm asked to change it, but this store is not a bank."



Domert shrugged. It amused him to see these two together—amused him that Rachel should be polite. His intentions about her had not changed, she must know that, and Louis too. But Louis was so anxious to trade that he could put other things aside. They were small people, both of them compared to himself, and the whisky in his brain gave him a glow of superiority. Rachel was going out on her trap lines, he knew that, and his real plans were made—which neither of them knew. Then he made Rachel a kind of mock salute.

"How's Miss Bedell?"

"Miss Bedell is all right," said she curtly. "Louis, I want some tea."

Louis turned and Domert, lounging over, leaned against the counter, his blood inflamed at the sight of her. Of late he had avoided her cabin for fear of the dogs. Why should a damned quarter-breed be so dignified?

"Going trapping again pretty soon?" his tone was familiar.

"Yes, pretty soon."

"Where?"

"Where I always go." She spoke quietly enough, wanting no quarrel here, in which case Louis would intervene and certainly lose a good customer. Behind lay the deadening fact that a quarter-breed woman must always remember her native blood. She hated this man, and on account of that blood could not help fearing him.

"Like to make me one of those swell parkas?" This with a shrewd glance at Louis. With the rest of Aklavik he now knew all about that gift.

"You can go somewhere else for that," she said, noting Louis' hand poised unsteadily over a packet of tea.

"I'd sooner have one of yours, and, say, perhaps you can change this note?"

"How much are you short, Louis?" she asked.

"Two hundred dollars."

Then to his astonishment a strange thing happened, and Rachel took out a folded packet, laid it on the counter, two notes of a hundred dollars each.

"By Gar," he exclaimed, "I don't see so much money in this store ever before."

She laughed with a touch of nervousness. "That's all right. I was taking it over to the post office to send out by the first plane."

Domert, watching her, gave his head a toss: he was impressed; he liked the way she did it, and no doubt there was a good deal more money behind this; he was already aware that she knew how to spend it. Her idea of life appealed to him—summer in a big city, winter in the north. It would suit him perfectly. Again he experienced for her, more than for any white woman, the desire of possession. What was it about that smooth tawny skin he found so exciting?

"Look here, I'm going to say it again? That partnership? Why not?"

The answer came swiftly, a stinging blow in his face, from the small hard hand. It seemed to explode against him and he reeled back. Louis, snatching up a knife, had vaulted the counter and was leaning against him eyes flaming, arm lifted. This for a second of time, then Rachel's voice, bitter with aversion.

"Throw him out, Louis."

Louis was the shorter, but had a barrel like body and the strength of a bullock. Domert left the store by air, landed on his back, picked himself up, put his hand to his hip, hesitated, and went off. From the door Rachel watched him ruefully.

"Louis, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I spoiled your business."

"You think I want business of a man like that? By Gar, no! Now you sit down and smoke one cigarette with me."

She nodded soberly, settled in the spare chair and stared at the pile of Domert's buying.

"Well, he's paid for it anyway."

"But me, no—I don't want his money."

"You might as well keep it, Louis. I don't know what's the matter with him, he hasn't given any trouble since, well, you know."

"What's that man doing in Aklavik anyway?" frowned Louis. "So many times I ask myself that and nobody knows. He don't go to Mass or Protestant church either. Pretty soon after he come, Corporal Jenks he told me he's pretty suspicious

about that man, and by and by he tell he make mistake."

"Why suspicious?"

"He think perhaps his name not Domert at all but something else, and the police up south are after him for making a robbery in some bank, but that's all wrong."

"If he'd stolen that money he wouldn't try to pass it here," she objected.

"Maybe that man drink so much whisky, he don't care." Louis opened his wallet, inspected the big note and put it away frowning. "She's one big bill for Aklavik, just the same. Cherie, suppose I take long chance to-night and ask you something?"

"I wouldn't, Louis, it's no use."

"You feel about me like you do about that man, eh?"

"You know I don't," she said quickly.

"Suppose," he went on with a sort of gentle patience, "that everything go all wrong for you, everything get all mix up. You don't know what to do. All one big puzzle and you say to yourself, 'By Gar! now is the time for Rachel Bedell to find someone to help! Suppose that happened, maybe pretty soon. What man you go to then, eh? You tell me?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe it's the man I know, one pilot in fancy parka with marten fur."

"I don't want to hurt you, Louis."

"You hurt me plenty for long time now, cherie. I guess you don't understand, Jack Wilding he ain't going to marry you, not never. I guess you don't see that."

He spoke with deep feeling because he loved her. Girls like this, unless they married and settled down were destined to become the exhausted playthings of men. He knew this. They couldn't defend themselves. Nor could he see her marrying any native and lapsing into the careless squalor of that life; but in the village behind Trois Rivières, he knew families in whose veins still ran Indian blood, in whose features could still be traced the wild ancestry of former days. That is where he wanted to take her. Then he became aware of her dark startled eyes.

"You're crazy, Louis. He does love me, he told me so."

"Maybe," now the man who did love her had a pang of suspicion. "Maybe you make him say that when something happened, eh? That's one time when a man says almost anything, and don't care what he say."

She was on her feet now, eyes flashing, breast in turmoil.

"No, not that, you're crazy, it's not like that, it never was."

"Alors, cherie, I am most glad, but you listen to me. Le bon Dieu, he make all kinds of people like Domert, like you and me, like Wilding, like

that Mademoiselle Deming, and one kind they don't marry with the other. Wilding he fly away with that girl. Why? Because she make her papa arrange that. Also because she think maybe sometime she marry him."

Rachel shook her head, and though her heart whispered that this might be the truth, she clung the more desperately to her dreams. There were a multitude of things that marriage with Wilding would bring that never entered Louis' thoughts, but one couldn't tell him that. She wanted Wilding's arms, not his, and there was no other answer to give. She had been happy when that blue-eyed man dropped out of the clouds and captured her love without an effort.

"You're wrong," she repeated stolidly, "and I'm sorry, but can't do anything about it till Jack comes back. Then he will tell you himself."

"Yeh, when he does so, I shall believe it, but not before." He sighed, brows furrowed, waving a hand at the pile beside him. "And this it is paid for, it is not mine, and if that man comes back for it we will fight."

Rachel got up with relief: she wanted to tell him that she did love him if not in the way he desired, but that would only invite further pleading.

"I'll tell Pituluk to take it over now. Good night, Louis." Then hesitating at the door. "Aklavik wouldn't be the same without you."

He sat for some time plunged in thought, only

nodding when a dog team halted outside, and the Husky came in for Domert's load, a different Husky since Isaluk's death, and lacking his usual grin. He loaded his toboggan, the sound of him dwindled, there was left only a low throaty throb in the sheet-iron stove, and presently Louis took out the five hundred dollar note, smoothing it on his knee, the biggest note he had ever seen. Men would have to work for a long time in the Territories, to earn that much. His mind roved back a few weeks—to the day when Corporal Jenks dropped in, and after some casual talk asked whether Domert had passed any paper money in that store. He had not. Did Louis know anything about him? Louis knew nothing. In case Domert did pass paper money would he retain the note and get in touch? This Louis promised. Then he learnt that the Corporal had put the same question and request to the Hudson's Bay Post Manager after which nothing more happened and the affair was apparently dropped. But you could never tell whether the police actually dropped anything or only appeared to.

Now Jenks was away on winter patrol to Herschell Island, his first visit since the freeze-up, but if the weather cleared would be back in two days and this matter should certainly be put before him; so Louis folded the note into his wallet and thrust it under a loose plank behind the counter, this being his safety deposit vault.

One o'clock in the morning now, and time for bed. When he went to the door and looked out, it was into pitch darkness and the pale gleam of light from the store window died abruptly among slanting lines of driving snow. It was the first big fall of the year on the coast—though there was much more up south. So he closed the door—there were but few locks in Aklavik—put wood in the stove, adjusted the damper, and returned to his quarters, a three-roomed annex on the south side of the building. It had its own exit.

He did not sleep soundly; the night was disturbed by uncomfortable dreams in which he, Wilding and Domert played antagonistic parts in rivalry for the girl; the framework of the building trembled against the thrust of wind, and the outer blackness seemed deeper than ever.

At three o'clock, Staff-Sergeant Whitson, on night duty, pulled on his parka, picked up an electric torch, and made for a louvre-sided box that stood on a post some fifty feet from the wireless office. It held meteorological instruments, and all through the north the men of the Signal Corps made records of precipitation, temperature, wind direction and velocity, with snowfall and rainfall for Government statistics. Whitson could not yet see the box, and bent as he walked, bracing himself to a north-westerly gale. A moment later, when the thermometer had been read—it gave only twenty below zero—he made out at a little distance what looked like a faint reddish



glow, and simultaneously heard the barking of dogs. Stuffing the flashlight into his pocket, he began to run.

Louis' store was ablaze, its interior a furnace, with flames already shooting through the sturdy timber roof, licking over the log walls. Illuminated in this hot glow, a few figures stood on the windward side, watching the conflagration in complete helplessness. With no water available, there was nothing to be done but watch. Louis shivered in a blanket, trousers and mukluks; the Post Manager, whose house was but two hundred yards away, came up panting; Rachel, she alone out of them fully dressed, was beside Louis, with Pituluk and Oomgah, who surveyed this desolation with sympathetic eyes. They were all helpless, the fire being, as it were, buried in the freezing heart of the blizzard, a sort of blistering secret that the storm hugged to itself and would not reveal to the rest of Aklavik till the snow ceased to fall and pale Arctic dawn succeeded the dark tempestuous night.

From the furnace came sharp fusillades as box after box of cartridges exploded: already yellow tongues were stealing into the annex, and through windows still unbroken they could be seen stroking like live things the smooth walls, and where they touched new flames were born till the annex took on a sort of transparency; it became a transitory shell, housing a great heart of flame, that presently flung itself through the roof and built a brilliant pyramid

amongst a myriad of hurtling flakes. This soared and subsided; it collapsed as though robbed of life; in ten minutes there was left but a glowing heap, a tiny red eye in a crystalline wilderness that the snow slowly sealed with a soft gentle hissing.

Whitson put his arm round Louis' shoulders.

"Damned bad luck, old man."

Louis did not speak.

"No insurance, of course?"

Louis shook his head. The same old hopeless story: with no brigade, no water system, with no protection, insurance was out of the question.

"How did it start? Any idea?"

"By Gar," exploded Louis, "how does she start. You ask me that! I am asleep and I smell smoke. I wake up quick. The place is full of smoke and I jump for the door. Hullo, Rachel, I guess you don't expect this, eh?"

"No, who could? Louis, can I help?"

Whitson, perceiving in him a candidate for pneumonia if this went on for too long a time, took him by the arm, marched him off to the Signal quarters and produced a bottle of rum. On the Beaufort Sea it was beyond price.

"Now then, drink it up, sharp; lots of room for you here, and don't worry any more than you can help. Better get to bed."

Louis, gulping, felt better. His body was getting a little warm, but his brain felt numb. Stock gone

—all of it, and no more procurable till *The Distributor* came down on her first trip, which would be at the end of June. Air service was too expensive for freight. He rubbed his smoke-grimed eyes.

"I guess I don't sleep just now; she's one queer thing that fire."

"Must have been the stove."

"That stove, she's just the same thing this three years and no trouble at all. I put in wood I shut the damper and she does the rest. Ah!——" He checked himself, then sat up straight and frowned. "Maybe it's something else. I guess yes."

"Well, what?"

"That Domert—last night we had some trouble about Rachel, and I kick him out—for the second time I kick him out of my store. The first time I kick him out of her cabin."

"Was Rachel there?"

"Sure, he buy a lot of stuff and——" Louis went on excitedly, telling the thing as it happened, and about the five hundred dollar note now lost forever, while the other man listened with growing suspicion. This affair was not for him to deal with.

"I guess you'd better keep your mouth shut till Jenks gets back from Herschell, then consult him. It sounds fishy to me. Now turn in and forget it."

Louis agreed that this was wise, and crawled between blankets, whereupon Whitson, dosing him with more rum, blew out the lamp. Before returning to the office to take over from the day operator

who had relieved him, he went back to what was once the store, now only a smouldering acrid heap, and stood for a moment thinking hard. The wind still held from north-west, the blizzard maintained its strength. It was curious, he reflected, that a midnight fire should, as this one evidently had, start on the windward side of the building—too curious to be quite natural.

Impulse then took him towards Domert's shack, which was a quarter mile further south-east. It was dark, it might have been the house of the dead; he looked for tracks leading from its door, but whatever there might have been were obliterated by the deepening drift, and from all one could now assume Domert, like most of the rest of the folk of Aklavik, would know nothing of the fire till morning broke.

Pushing back against the storm, he laid his fingers to the key and reported to Edmonton what had happened.

## CHAPTER X

RACHEL'S trap lines were laid in a triangle, each side of it some ten miles long: at each corner of the base was a shelter and small cache of provision, while her winter hunting cabin stood at the apex. This apex was some forty miles from Aklavik. By unwritten law of the north no other lines might cross hers, and the enclosed territory was her own by rights. Its base reached the foothills of the Richardson Range where woodland caribou were plentiful.

It was her custom to establish herself in this private area after the first good snow had made travelling possible for the dogs, and now she had come out with a sense of relief, thankful to be rid for awhile of Aklavik and its difficulties, of Louis and his too-persistent suit, of Domert and his too obvious desires. She hated Domert with an intensity beyond anything she had ever yet felt.

Corporal Jenks, his skin black from snow glare, and following on the tail of the blizzard, had arrived from Herschell Island two days after the fire, and at Whitson's suggestion spent a thoughtful hour with Louis, then he summoned Rachel and got the same story. Did they remember the number of the five hundred dollar note? They had not thought of looking at that. Or the Bank of issue? Louis thought

it was Montreal and Rachel not sure. Jenks frowned at this, rubbing a chin tender from recent shaving, and watched Ahtigiak shovelling a pathway in the barracks square. Ahtigiak was short but very powerful, with a body shaped something like an egg. A horizontal crack near the top might have represented his mouth, which wore a never-failing grin.

That note! reflected the Corporal. Something was building up in his mind: he visioned Domert rather drunk bringing it out in bravado, then, later and more sober, suddenly realising what he had done. Followed the fire. Quick action this, and in line with the reputation of a man called Prado, but without the note there was no real evidence, nor was any policeman in a position to search Domert's cabin for other notes. So he told the two to discuss the matter with no one, and wired what he did know to the Inspector at Fort Simpson.

Next he dropped in on Domert. That makeshift cabin was a small affair carelessly thrown together, five foot log walls straddled by the wedged tent in which the owner had first lived after arrival in Aklavik. There was a board floor, a pole bunk on one side, a small table, two chairs, a sheet metal stove with its pipe passing through a tin plate in the canvas roof. Jenks, stooping as he went in, passed the time of day and avoided too close a scrutiny of Domert's non-committal features. The face was blank. To begin with, Jenks, aware that this visit was quite accurately interpreted, talked

about Herschell Island with its one inhabitant, and the difference between that and what it would be in July when for a fortnight it was the hub of the Beaufort Sea. He talked of that, and of the near arrival of the first plane from the south, till gradually he touched on Louis' loss and what it meant to a trader.

"I've got to report it, of course, and would be glad if you happen to know anything."

"I was asleep and didn't hear about it till morning. No, I've nothing to tell you."

"Like most of the others, eh? You'd seen Louis that night though."

"Sure I saw him. I left about midnight. I'd just bought a lot of stuff from him. Pituluk brought it over with his team."

Jenks glanced about the bare room. "What stuff?"

"Well, flour, bacon, that sort of thing. No, it's not here—I hired a Husky to pull it out to my other shack. It's on the way there now."

"I see. While you were at Louis' did you notice anything liable to cause a fire?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary except that the stove was pretty hot, and with a hell of a gale blowing outside, the whole place creaked. It's my idea that the stove pipe worked loose where it goes through the roof, and started the fire there. It isn't the first time that sort of thing has happened."

"You'd been drinking a little, hadn't you?" Jenks' tone was quite casual.

"Louis told you that?"

"He did, and I'm glad to have it confirmed."

"Louis' right enough, but I wasn't drunk. Just the end of the last bottle. It gets one down here, too, but a two gallon permit doesn't last long. I got a little fresh with the lady when she came in, and Louis gave me the air. I don't blame him. That, as I said, was about midnight."

"You gave him a \$500 note in payment, and asked for change," said Jenks smoothly.

"Sure, I did." Domert's voice had an equally calculated smoothness which made the Corporal hot with anger, but he was on thin ice, stretching his authority to the limit. He ached to search this shack.

"Happen to remember its number?"

"It was the amount not the number that interested me."

"Or where you got it—there aren't so many of them about."

"I got it——" Here Domert paused for a moment, his manner that of a man completely at ease. He had the air of one who, knowing exactly where he stood as regards the law, and his visitor's limitations, deliberates quite coolly how to fashion his reply, so that Jenks could almost see him choosing, discarding, selecting, giving a sort of artistic polish to the lie he was about to utter. To the helpless Corporal



this was infuriating, but with the patience of his breed he bided his time, convinced that the end was not yet. Liars had a way of tripping themselves up when least anticipated.

"I guess it was in July at some bank in the east—some French bank," continued Domert. "I had five notes of one hundred each and changed them for that one as a sort of nestegg. I reckoned it was more convenient to carry, and I'd be less likely to blow it in."

"I see. Well, it's gone now."

"I didn't notice it was made of asbestos."

Jenks got up. He had ventured rather further than he intended, but this studied insolence was a new thing in the Territory, and it piqued him: all he could do now was to wire the Inspector again. Perhaps that very astute officer would suggest a way out, but just at the present he would gladly have given a year's seniority to be able to march this man across to the barracks.

"Well, good-day. We fellows have to make ourselves unpopular now and then, but it's all in the line of duty."

"That's all right, and you were just in time: I'm starting for the bush to-morrow."

"Trapping?"

"No. Sort of nature study," drawled Domert. "I don't pretend to set traps like some other fellows round here. Well, so long, Corporal. Drop in again any time you feel like it."

A week had gone by and Rachel now established on her trap lines was breaking trail for a team of labouring dogs. In this northern framework she moved with assurance, a strangely composite creature: elsewhere she aspired to the life of a white woman with its gentleness, its contacts, its dress, its setting; she set herself to absorb all these with an assiduity of which none except herself was aware, but so often as she went back to the bush there stirred within her another different and more fundamental personality; once here she thrilled with every wild and primitive instinct, her native perceptions took command, and automatically she responded to every elusive message that reached in from the ageless wilderness.

She was tramping between clustered spruce in easy tireless motion, her head, a little bent, lithe body in graceful balance, when suddenly she stopped the dogs and went forward to a narrow line of small pointed imprints, following at a parallel distance until it ended at a hole under an upturned trunk. At one spot the disturbed snow showed a depression stained with pink amongst a litter of white feathers, and she knew that here a fox had killed a ptarmigan. Now, first she changed her mittens, putting on the gland-scented ones always used in the bush because they transmitted no man smell, and took from her pack a light steel trap. This was linked at one end of a thin six foot steel chain, and at the other dangled an iron pin five inches long. The pin she drove solidly

into a tree trunk well below snow level. Four feet away, also below snow level, she set the trap, and over it a pan of thin snow crust the size and shape of the trap, very light and fragile, and cut from a nearby drift. It made a small skylight above the steel jaws. Now the bait—half of a skinned rabbit at a calculated distance so that approaching it an animal must perforce step on the pan. That there should be one preferable access for the four-footed, she stuck up a branch or two forming a natural looking gateway. Finally, with another branch, she began sweeping loose snow over it all, shrouding pin, chain and pan, obliterating as well her own retreating tracks till there could only be discerned half a rabbit caught in the fork of a birch sapling a few inches above the fleecy surface.

A mile further on the trap line crossed a creek now shrunken to a ribbon of ice between bushy banks, and on the other side of this she came across fresh snow-shoe tracks. Studying them closely, she felt disturbed; at first they were unidentified, but seemingly those of a man not quite at home in the bush, a man of middle height and rather tired because of the diversions they took in avoiding obstacles: the depth of the print and varying length of stride told her this much. Also they were new shoes.

She examined them more closely; the thickness of frame, the size of webbing, the length of tail,

curve of nose, width of cross-bars—these gradually became suggestive—they stimulated memory till in a flash it all came back;—Louis sitting on the store counter in shirt sleeves swinging his legs, Domert beside the puttering stove with that insolent look on his face, and those same shoes tied together with rawhide and a length of the lampwick that one always used for straps because, unlike leather, it didn't stretch when it was wet in melting snow. Domert! what was he doing here?

At this discovery she unslung the rifle from her shoulder, took off its caribou skin cover, and moved on. This time Domert would find her ready.

Unconsciously she was moving to meet him; three days previously he had come out to his winter shack with a sense of relief, having seen enough of Corporal Jenks for the present. He entertained no high opinion of that officer's intelligence, and considered his methods distinctly clumsy, but the real objection to his kind was that they didn't know when to stop, and Domert, alias Prado, felt keenly aware that the Corporal was not in any way satisfied with things as they stood. Nor, probably, the Inspector at Fort Smith.

He admitted that he had been a damned fool when with drink in him he went to Louis' store and did business, but that was all over now, and the big note reduced to grey ash. Expensive, he reflected. Perhaps loneliness had made him reckless and a bigger fool than usual over Rachel, but

the mere sight of her always inflamed him. He couldn't help that. As to the note, that had been the greatest madness of all; the producing of it a gesture of superiority, he was only showing off, and not till he found his bemused way back to his own cabin did the full significance of the situation dawn upon him.

His first instinct was to go back, bluff, and retrieve the note, but further consideration indicated the danger of that, so he sat for an hour shoving wood into his small sheet-steel stove, listening to the gale, feeling its pressure on the canvas roof, till a tin of coal oil in the corner suggested the only way out. It would probably cause Louis' ruin, Louis the only man in Aklavik with whom he had really cared to talk, but that couldn't be helped; one would have the settlement to oneself at that hour, the wind held just right for the purpose, and the blizzard an ally that would bury his tracks.

This man's nature was ruthless; once a plan of action had been selected he followed it with cool, unswerving purpose; breaking the laws of God and man with a sense of personal triumph. No fear for the future burdened the immediate present: he depended solely on his own intelligence to meet what might be ahead, and this intelligence being of a high, unhesitating order made him dangerous. Added to this he had a strong body, with unusual faculties of endurance, keen powers of observation, and an indifference to physical culture that was an asset in this kingdom of the north.

The fire had been a simple matter, quicker even than he anticipated: no other human being was unsheltered, and in that dark hour he had Aklavik to himself. Then the flat roof of Louis' store blown clean of snow, two quarts of coal oil on the north-east corner of the notched walls, the smell of oil as, huddling, he struck match after match till one caught, the swift lick of flame making in the driving snow a cave of light in which his figure stood out blackly, the retreat to his own cabin, the assuring fact that his first tracks were already being obliterated. Followed sleepless hours till grey of morning. How easy, he reflected, when he found a knot of men beside the flattened ruins now shrouded in white, and wondered where in that shapeless heap lay the note that months before he had extracted from a dynamited safe in the Yukon territory. And standing in silent triumph, already he had decided what must next be done.

Since reaching Aklavik he had vanished for days at a time, saying nothing of where he went but actually exploring the country lying west of the Delta till he came to know it unusually well. This bordered the Yukon Territory, which in turn stretched along the Alaskan Frontier, but first must be traversed a difficult, seldom travelled route that took one over the Divide, ultimately to Dawson City on the great stream of the Yukon, and following that across the border to Alaska. It formed probably the least used and

least known trail of escape from Canadian to American jurisdiction.

During these explorations he had pitched upon a shallow ravine leading into Barrier River that seemed designed for the purpose in hand. It was secluded, one might pass close by and not discover it, timber stood thick and plentiful, a creek gurgled under its clothing of ice and there were woodland caribou grazing not far off. A belt of cotton-wood growth screened it from the Barrier, and to reach it one crossed open spaces where periodic snow crust would make it difficult to follow a snow-shoe trail. There were good indications of fur, but it was not fur that Domert sought, though he might pick up a skin or two: the significant fact was that here in the heart of the bush forty miles from Aklavik he could count on an uninterrupted meeting with Rachel Bedell. Her trap lines ran close by.

Here then Domert built his second shack, and here, after the fire, he persuaded Pituluk to haul his supplies. There was method in that, the Husky being about to start east along the coast of the Beaufort Sea on a tour during which he proposed to combine the trapping of white foxes with as much professional dental surgery as possible. With Pituluk therefore out of the way, seclusion would be the more secure. This migration had been completed just before Rachel moved out to her lines for a season of the work she loved best.

Now only a mile away the girl was on Domert's

trail, her keen eyes alight, every roving instinct on guard. The trail curved away from her lines, curved back again and presently she stood over one of her own traps sprung and empty; beside it the fresh imprint of shoes, between the jaws—it was a mink trap—she found a stain of blood, a few fine silky hairs. A little grey ash indicated that the robber had stayed long enough to light his pipe, the butt of a rifle left its impression and she could see where its muzzle had touched a tree. Suddenly the leader of her team put his black nose into the air and barked. He scented something he did not like.

Hot anger welled up in her. In the woods she, a creature of the woods, feared nothing: prudence told her that the wise course would be to follow Domert's track, ascertain where he camped—it could not be far away—return to Aklavik and put the matter to the police, but this meant twenty hours' journey over a heavy trail, and she grudged the time. On the other hand, she was well armed, Domert would certainly not be expecting any such prompt pursuit, so finally anger prevailed.

The tracks, now striking to the south, held straight, and soon she came upon the shack set in a clear space behind the belt of cottonwoods, with non-timbered ground all round. Screened in a fringe of green bush she studied it carefully—about twelve feet square, casually built with no great skill, its walls snow-banked, a pile of wood



nearby, two small windows in front. No smoke rose from the projecting stove-pipe, no snow-shoes stood outside, no dogs were visible, no sound could be heard. The tracks led straight to the door, and from that door she could see others radiating in different directions, so Domert must have come back, left his stolen fur and started out again.

She looked at the sky and reflected, feeling very much alone, for not more than one hour of daylight now remained, and three long miles lay between her and her own camp. After another searching scrutiny of the cabin, she stepped forward, rifle ready. A hundred feet off, she called and her voice lost itself unanswered amongst the tracery of cotton-woods. Now approaching from the side out of range of the window, she came quite close and halted with every nerve tingling. This shack might have been the home of the dead.

Now round to the front where she peered through a window and saw only a curtain of rough sacking. Six feet from the door she threw at it a lump of snow, simultaneously lifting the rifle to her shoulder. Nothing happened. At last she stepped up and lifted the latch. The door did not open being securely fastened on the other side by some kind of sliding bolt she did not recognise or method she could not determine, so that without question Domert was somewhere in the woods not far off,

in which case she had better not be found here, and she turned away.

At that instant the door was swung open, the rifle knocked from her hand, a violent grip on her shoulder jerked her backwards. Immediately the door closed.

## CHAPTER XI

THE backwater on the lower Athabasca at Fort McMurray had yielded to the first touch of winter as slowly it moved up from the north heralded by chilly winds that stripped the poplars, driving a scurry of crackling leaves over the forest floor, and leaving a network of fragile branches that stretched confidently towards the grey sky. Rivers long since had begun to shrink, the shallows of Lake Athabasca widened, revealing flat islands of rock and sand, white trunks of birch trees stood out starkly against dark evergreens, and the northland look skinned. Trappers re-chinked their cabins and cut wood to be pulled in when the real winter came. Stripped of all green, the massive serenity of distant hills appeared to move closer in the quiet translucent air, the atmosphere was charged with approaching change, revealing unexpected cliffs, terraces and ravines hitherto hidden by a summer shrouding, while the crust of earth protested against this nakedness and appealed in silence for its blanket of snow.

After Great Bear Lake and the lower Mackenzie had closed for the freeze-up there was still flying to be done further south: some of the planes retained their pontoons while others were being equipped with skis for winter service, and it was

during this season that Paula Deming developed a new and to her a refreshing ambition.

In past weeks she had a consciousness that in an odd sort of fashion she was being re-educated: elsewhere when she visited a great deal was done for her—but here nothing, yet strangely it was enough. She was welcome and knew it, but that welcome was the limit of Mary Scott's resources. There was nothing more to give, and had not Mary's instinct assured her that beneath the sophisticated and superficial Paula moved another personality hitherto submerged because too much had been done for her, she would never have ventured to risk the hospitality of the McMurray bungalow.

At the same time she was acquiring for this girl a very genuine affection, not a little due to her thoughtfulness about Scott, who recovered but slowly from his grim experience. He had not regained lost flesh, and his cough shook the house, but he assailed Sturt every day arguing that he was perfectly fit to fly, while that experienced officer just as positively refused. He knew, as indeed did Scott himself, that especially for winter service a pilot must be at the top of his form, so persistence availed nothing. Scott would hang about the base, watch the planes being overhauled, talk to Roberts, on whom the affair of Whaleback Island, as it now was called, had left not a trace, then come back to the bungalow in a mute kind of revolt that Mary found hard to assuage. It was at such times that

Paula showed her real quality: she sent to Vancouver for an all-wave radio set by which the three listened to the ends of the earth while sitting beside the open fire: when she learned that Scott was fond of history, a case of new books arrived a week later, then he read by the hour, and for such time forgot his disability. She asked him a thousand questions, displaying such genuine interest in northern life, and seeming so fascinated by what he told her, that it would have been churlish not to respond. Towards wealth and independence hers was the attitude of a child: life had never held anything she had asked and been refused, and her acceptance of its gifts was quite casual, but now in her secret heart she was for the very first time hoping for something she felt not at all sure of getting.

Mary had an intuition about this, and was discussing it with her husband one day when Paula had persuaded Wilding to show her the great tar sand beds that here overhung the Athabasca: material for such straggling pavements as were found in McMurray had been dug from this natural deposit.

"You know," she said, "that girl is changing. I was puzzled when she first suggested that she'd like to stay on, but now I've a gleam of light."

"From which direction?"

"I thought it came across the road."

"Jack?"

"What else? My dear, she's just the right age,

and I think she's getting the very first taste of what she takes to be romance that ever came to her. Things were too well and smoothly ordered before this to have very much taste; she said so herself. I'm quite sure that it isn't in you or me she finds any particular local interest."

"You're right as far as I'm concerned, but as for Jack, marriage isn't much in his line; matter of fact, he's dodging the altar."

"You mean Rachel?"

"No—out of the question—but he's more or less responsible in that matter—though he never speaks of her."

"Then why not Paula?"

"Dunno, but I don't just see it. Can you, with all that it involves? Jack won't turn from flying and settle down to the flesh pots. I wouldn't fancy it myself."

This spontaneous remark was so sincere that she felt a little depressed, for here was the real Jim Scott, senior pilot. He had no conception of the struggle she had with herself to be brave and gay, of the long, sleepless nights that came when he was out over the Yukon Boundary or far down the Mackenzie. The air was his element not hers; whatever he might display of courage and fortitude she more than matched with a loving, gentle endurance all her own; and no one knew what the affair of Whaleback Island had cost her. For how many more years, she wondered, did he propose

to traverse the hollow caves of air, a bird man spurning earth, fugitive from those who loved him?

At any rate, she reflected, he could not begin again just yet: his cough shook him, he looked tired, and moved like a tired man. At nights she was awakened by that cough. She had begged him to take her and James Scott Junior to Edmonton during the freeze-up, but he wouldn't, and seemed unable to break loose from the familiar setting and apparent fascination of the base. What she most greatly feared was that he would insist soon, though still unfit, on taking to the air. The first winter mail would be starting for Aklavik before long, and Scott had always flown it in.

"Did Jack ever discuss Paula with you?" she asked.

"He spoke about her once or twice, but there wasn't any discussion: he told me about their trip south, the forced landing and all that. He wasn't as cynical as usual; on the other hand I don't think he was at all impressed. Neither of them are in the least sentimental as far as I can see, though there may be a side of him that nobody really knows."

"They ought to be back now," said Mary, "they'll miss their tea."

The two were miles away, but did not miss their tea, and at that moment Wilding was lifting a small tin pail off the green pole from which it had hung over a fire. Slowly he poured a cup full of cold water to settle the leaves.

"Sugar?"

"Please, and milk."

"I didn't bring any, you won't need it, tea's better without it."

"Oh!"

"Make yourself some toast." He carved a loaf, cut a forked stick, impaled a slice and handed it to her. "Here you are, don't burn it."

"Thanks; I see you don't over-rate my intelligence."

"I'm doing the best I can," he grinned. "Hungry?"

"Terribly: you?"

"No, I just want tea. Tired?"

She shook her head. "Not a bit, and I'm glad we came, it's interesting."

"This stuff," he picked a lump from the bed of tar sand that projected above the hill surface just over them: it was black, gritty, plastic in the warmth of the hand, "a lot of people thought it was valuable when the boom was on, but that was before my time: now it's a washout."

"Why?"

"Too far from markets and too much competition."

"But, Jack, it makes good pavements, doesn't it?"

"Certainly, you've seen them."

"And you just have to dig it out?"

"That's all—roll it out flat and let it lie. Gets a bit soft, though, in hot weather."



"And only a few miles of railway needed."

"Six or seven to the end of steel, but you're forgetting a few hundred thousand dollars to swing the thing, and advertise and develop and push it on the market," said he caustically.

"Well, why not? Isn't that the very first thing?"

"Eh?"

"It's not so much money, is it?"

Wilding blinked at her: she sounded quite serious, and certainly her expression was that of a young woman very much in earnest. Her eyes were bright as she took the lump from him and began to pinch it forcefully, moulding it into a miniature head the shape of which became not unlike his own. Doing this she sent him a series of quick provocative glances. He had no conception of what was in her thoughts and what gave the small face, now rather scratched, a look so suddenly sober, no idea that to her a quarter of a million dollars were actual ponderable figures not figures of speech, that she was accustomed to hearing Deming discuss larger matters than this with his associates, and that, later on, her own fortune would much exceed a quarter of a million. All this was quite beyond him. Nor did he realise that beneath her very modern and casual exterior lay a confidence and daring that, though of another nature, was not inferior to his own.

"Who owns it?" she asked sticking little pebbles into the model's head to make eyes. "And these stones are grey—not blue."

"Owns what?"

"All this." She waved a hand. "All this possible pavement, thousands of miles of it. My goodness, we could pave every city in the west. Won't you please stir up your grey matter and picture the possibilities we're actually sitting on?"

"I don't know, probably some syndicate. And if you sat here too long in midsummer you couldn't get up again—you'd stick."

"Where can one find the owners?"

"Most likely at the Land Office in Edmonton. Why?"

"Well, I think that—never mind now. Remember those oil wells you showed me—where was it?"

"Just below Norman."

"What's the matter with that oil?"

"Nothing at all."

"Then why isn't more of it used?"

"Ask me another."

"I will. Now I want you to do something for me."

"More tea?"

"No," she smiled, "teach me to fly."

"Fly! You!"

"Why not? I'm of age, physically sound, and not quite a moron. Other girls have learnt, several of my friends, and they all love it."

"Not in this part of the world," he objected. "Forget it."

"Jack, please take it more seriously, I'm serious, I'll get authority from father. If I do that, if he

writes to you personally—and of course it would be a business arrangement—wouldn't that be all right? I know exactly what you're thinking—it's all over your face—but you see, well, there's a lot about me that you don't know yet—the kind of person I am inside really. I—I haven't been very sure about that myself till lately. Jack, please."

Wilding, re-filling his cup, had a tinge of regret; it seemed that perhaps he hadn't always been quite fair in her case, hadn't given her credit for much behind that rather spoilt expression, while now, secretly, he was both gratified and rather astonished. What kind of a girl was she really? One couldn't miss the determination in the lines of her mouth, but what else? And, he admitted, that she should want to take to the air, his natural element, gave her at once a new position in his thoughts.

"Well?" Her voice had a touch of pleading; she looked at him very straight.

"Do you want to begin now?" he asked dubiously.

"Why not? How long before the first plane starts for Aklavik?"

"That's impossible to say—perhaps a fortnight; it depends on the weather."

"Could one learn to fly in a fortnight if one has driven a car for fourteen years?"

"Depends on the learner and the weather."

"One would have the sole services of a skilled instructor," said she.

He grinned in spite of himself. "Would one?"

"Jack," she went on earnestly, "won't you meet a girl half-way—won't you put any ideas you may have formed of me out of your head, and start fresh, and consider me just a, well, sort of commercial proposition that happened to come your way; that's how I want it."

"Do you think I'd take anything for teaching you?"

"Why not; you would from anyone else; I don't see why you should draw the line at me," she countered deftly.

"That is exactly what I meant," said he frowning a little, wondering just what he did mean. Then, because he could not help being distinctly flattered he added: "Your father wouldn't agree anyway."

"Perhaps I know father better than you do. And if he does?"

"Look here," he protested, trying not to smile, "you're putting me in a devil of a box. Supposing your father did say yes, and I said 'no thanks,' what then? Do I get fired?"

Paula got up, sent him an odd glance, and dropped the lump of tar sand into the fire; it softened to a viscous patch gave off a black smoke and began to burn with hot, dark flame.

"There won't be any 'what then.' I'll wire father to-day; I'll be an obedient pupil and am simply enormously obliged; I can't tell you how much I'm obliged even if you did put up a brave fight. Also I'll try and repay in some other way that won't outrage your gentlemanly uncommercial instincts."

Wilding laughed at her. "You're a queer one; always get your own way?"

"I never ask for anything I don't think I can get, and I'm of age."

"You're a kid just the same."

"I came out years ago," she murmured demurely, "also I'm not sentimental—ever."

"No, I didn't imagine you could be."

"Why not?" she asked flushing indignantly. "Indeed why not?"

"I didn't suppose you were built that way: you needn't get hot—you're well out of it."

"Can you picture me developing into an elderly grey-haired spinster with the march of years?"

"Dunno, hadn't got that far." He said it cautiously, aware that she'd taken on some odd kind of attraction not noticeable before. Knowing her better, it was queer that he should suddenly feel this: he had less latent antagonism and more friendship, he began to see in her the makings of a good pal who might help him to rid himself of those secret spasms of loneliness that within the last month or so had puzzled him not a little, so it might be a bit of luck that she had happened along, especially as he found no trace of sentiment in anything she ever said, or did, or looked. And there was no doubt about her pluck.

"We'd better be getting back; dark soon. Look here, Paula, if I've been a bit short now and again I didn't mean to be rude: living down here you don't

meet many people, especially women; socially I'm a bit stiff in the joints."

"So are mine stiff," she laughed, getting up. "Anything more to see here?"

"No, we'd better make for home: it'll be hard going before we get there."

He poured on the fire what remained of the tea, and they struck off along the flank of the hill above the Athabasca's tawny flood down which in former years drifted flotillas of laden scows on their long, leisurely passage to the lakes and lower Mackenzie. Not yet had winter sealed that great stream: the backwater at the base was still partially open, so that for a hundred miles north from McMurray flying on pontoons was still possible. To the south towards Edmonton and Lac la Biche, and Cooking Lake where the planes for Edmonton landed, the weather remained autumnal, and it occurred to Wilding that it was up to him to suggest that this girl should go to Edmonton where she could live in a luxurious hotel, and take instruction there. But for some obscure reason he said nothing of this. If she must learn, if she was determined to risk her neck, he proposed to stay on the job himself. Now why was that?

When they reached the base he was saying good night and about to cross to his own bungalow when Scott called him.

"Come in, pilot, I want to see you. News from Aklavik, sit down, light up."

"What's the news?"

"Louis' burned out: the fire started at three this morning, and was over in no time. There's nothing left."

"That's bad luck with navigation closed. What started it?"

"No one knows yet, but I've a private idea it's a bit of dirty work on the part of a recent arrival. Remember that fellow you flew in with Rachel?"

"Domert?"

"That's the one, do you recall that big robbery in the Yukon last June?"

"A bank wasn't it? Yes."

"Well, when I was in Bear Lake we came across an old paper with the suspected thief's photo, and it looked so like what Domert would be without a beard that Roberts wired the police in Aklavik. Then we went on to the Coppermine. The Corporal there got on the air, and learned that Jenks had satisfied himself there was nothing in it. Domert, it seems, had proved an alibi."

"Then that's that, isn't it?"

"Not quite, to my mind. Now Rachel comes into it."

Paula, who had been listening silently, became suddenly very interested, and glanced curiously at Wilding. Rachel! She had not thought much about Rachel of late.

"How could that be?" she asked.

"Ever hear of the Moccasin Telegraph?"

"No."

"It's peculiar to these latitudes; it transmits information in a rather remarkable way, and the news is usually correct. I can't explain it—no one knows how it travels—but there it is, and nine times out of ten you can bank on it. Now the moccasin telegraph reports bad blood between Domert and Louis over Rachel. I went across to the signal station this afternoon and confirmed it. They got through to Aklavik, and Whitson says that the night before the fire Louis threw Domert out of his store, Rachel being there at the time."

Wilding was silent and uncomfortable. Recently, for some reason, the Rachel affair had worried him less and less, not merely because she was fifteen hundred miles away, and utterly isolated except by wireless. This news brought her sharply back: he visioned her very clearly, felt her arms round his neck, heard that: "By God, I love you," come from her very soul, and heard his own: "Of course I love you"; damned fool that he was. He pictured her, impulsive, generous, full of courage and spirit, and because she was ready to give everything asking but little, and he was only human, he now felt for her an attraction he had not known before.

"I don't suppose anything can be proved," he said, ill at ease.

"Probably not but—er—my other idea is that we're just at the start of things. I'll learn more when I get there."

Mary looked at him anxiously and shook her



head. "Don't be foolish, Jim. You're not going to Aklavik."

"I've flown the first winter mail into the Arctic for the last four years and don't propose to miss it now," said he stubbornly. "I'll be okay in a fortnight."

"You won't stir out of the base till doctor lets you."

Scott laughed at her, lit a cigarette and began to cough deeply, harshly; it shook him, they could see that it hurt, he became flushed, then paled and leaned back breathing hard. Wilding saw that there was no real strength in him, and his body lacked its old buoyant suggestion, that physical readiness to which they were all so long accustomed. It had never occurred to anyone to ask Scott how he felt.

"I'll sit on his head, Mary, and Sturt'll have something to say. I'll probably go myself," said the younger man crisply.

To this Scott answered nothing, but presently got up, and they could hear him still coughing in the next room where Mary immediately joined him. Wilding looked worried.

"Devil of a bark, isn't it? Trouble with old Jim is that he's come to regard himself as a bit of a superman—a sort of automatic robot pilot that's immune from any kind of interruption. Being as strong as a moose and always having had his own way—there's his difficulty. But Sturt won't let him stir out of this till he's fit."

"I hope not. Jack, what about Rachel?"

"Nothing to be done there, so why look so serious?"

"I'm terribly sorry for that girl."

"Why?"

"Well, of course she—she's in love with you, though I can't imagine why, but anyway she was awfully good to me and must be desperately lonely now, and if only I could see more of her next time I believe I could help, I'm sure I could."

"Why help? I think she'd resent anything of that sort."

"Not being in love with anyone myself I could talk to her as a sort of independent friend," explained Paula coolly, "a rational human-being. I don't suppose she's ever spent much time with a girl of her own age, so quite possibly she's hungry for it. If she thought I was in love with you—which is absurd—it might be different."

"It most certainly would," said he, feeling for some reason slightly affronted, "but you can't go and plant yourself on Rachel. It isn't like that down north: people are hospitable, yes, but you can't walk in on 'em off hand. Rachel will be out on her trap lines now and, anyway, you can't get there—unless you walk. Walking's rather poor at the moment."

"Well," she answered briskly, "for one thing Rachel asked me to come back whenever I could, and for another I am going in with the first plane, whoever flies it. About two weeks ago you said you'd a lot yet to learn about women, Jack. Please don't forget that."

## CHAPTER XII

FIFTEEN hundred miles away Rachel, very silent, sat in a corner of Domert's cabin watching him with hostile eyes, her breast stormy. He took no direct notice of her now, but she was aware that no slightest move on her part was unmarked: he seemed, too, a little amused and not a little triumphant. Bacon was sizzling on the tin stove and he turned the slices with a long metal fork.

As yet he had offered no violence beyond the first swift inward jerk that landed her helpless with the well-remembered skinning knife snatched from her waist, such being the finale of a plan quickly adopted and as quickly carried out. In the act of stealing the marten he had heard her dogs barking at no great distance, and knew that she was on his trail. Then, having no desire to meet her in the open, and certain that she would follow his fresh tracks, a hurried retreat to the cabin, the extinguished fire, the sealed windows, the snow-shoes out of sight instead of up-ended by the door. She would undoubtedly try that door, then as surely turn away. How simple! She had walked up to the bait with less caution than the marten whose silky body now lay on the floor beside her.

Domert was in no hurry, his being the kind of brain that could feed contentedly on anticipation

before the realising of his desires, and the more so because this present situation fitted so well into his general scheme. It gave it taste and finish. He had arrived at Aklavik on his planned deliberate way elsewhere, but not till he first saw the quarter-breed girl as she came down to the landing stage at McMurray had the full possibilities of the immediate future dawned on him. From that moment she had been part of it.

To-night with the shrewdness of instinct that marked his nature he set his mind in parallel to hers, and was able to interpret with surprising accuracy the reactions that possessed her at this moment. She was not frightened, nothing in her attitude suggested fear, she was only planning just as he was planning, she was reckoning how long it would be before she was missed, how long before someone came along, found her trap lines unattended, her own cabin empty. He had thought of all that—and it might be a month. Time enough! He would be in Alaska in a week with luck, and with her.

He must take her with him—drive her if possible—police pursuit being the more certain if he did not; also he wanted her for a long time to come. That was curious he admitted, but factual. He desired not only her body but her presence. It was in a way ridiculous and sentimental, he'd never felt both these aspirations before concerning any woman, but there it was, and he couldn't get away from it, and once she'd been brought to physical

surrender as never before; once she was his woman, the rest would suit him exactly. He didn't appraise her against any possible white woman he might later discover, and his intention was gradually to impress on her that from him there offered no escape. In the meantime no more violence.

"Supper's ready," he said smoothly.

When he spoke her expression changed, he thought almost that she smiled, at any rate her hostility diminished and this gave him a sense of satisfaction and confidence, so that his manner also was modified: it became less threatening, more human, as though he was partner in some kind of truce arranged over the bacon and coffee. Much better to have it thus.

She began to eat as a healthy person eats; her teeth were very, very white, her hands slim and strong. She seemed hardly aware of his presence, and they might have been a married couple for whom custom and long habitude had made a meal rather a silent and preoccupied affair. That was what occurred to him, also that she fitted perfectly into this setting of cabin, wilderness, snow, timber, and isolation. She contributed the finishing touch. He was a man of imagination, and the picture she now made, the slight grace of her body, the assured ease of every movement, roused in him a sort of admiration, a spontaneous subtle tribute that was for the immediate present devoid of hunger and desire. He had not imagined he could feel this; it puzzled and rather amused him. Was he getting soft?

But Domert, alias Prado, was far from the truth: his perception had gone astray. The calmness of her manner, the calmness almost casual, was only a screen, and in reality she was divided between fear, hope and astonishment: fear of what any woman would fear, astonishment at something this man had overlooked, and hope of escape. He might be reckless, but at the same time he was a fool.

The dogs! He had forgotten her dogs!

Not for an instant since she was dragged inside had the thought of them left her, while it seemed that to her captor it had never once occurred. After the first vicious struggle from which she escaped to the corner she had held ever since, she had through the small window watched the halted team: they stood for a while, then with the exception of the leader laid down to await her command. But not the leader. He continued staring at the cabin, sharp, black-tipped ears forward, aware that something was wrong. Half an hour passed and he still stood motionless, irresolute, while she tried to project her human mine into his brute consciousness, praying that he might do the one and only thing.

Presently he grew restless, scratching the snow with strong claws, gazing about, a sort of yellow-backed, cream-bellied sentinel, till of a sudden he turned, thrust his strong shoulders into the collar, jerked his prone followers to their feet and set off without a sound, not back over his own trail but in the direction

of Aklavik. She saw the toboggan snatched round a clump of spruce and disappear.

Now Domert, who had no knowledge of this, turned towards her.

"I want to talk to you," said he refilling his cup.

"Well, talk."

"You don't get me right," he began to argue. "I guess you're pretty angry, but what's the use: you wouldn't talk to me in Aklavik, and that's what brought me here, understand?"

"Then why should I talk to you now?"

"We've a couple of weeks; I can stand it as long as you can. What's the matter with me anyway?"

"A couple of weeks."

"You're on your trap lines aren't you?" he suggested sarcastically. "That's all right—we've got the place to ourselves."

"I see. Well, you keep your hands off me and perhaps I will talk."

This exactly suited his own views, and he was pleased: she was coming, he felt, to the mood he desired, and much better so than having to drive a rebellious captive two hundred miles into Alaska, so again he luxuriated in the anticipation of future possession. He had a strong sense of the dramatic, and pictured himself displaying his woman in cities like San Francisco or Seattle. His woman!

"Now that's better, a lot better: I'm all right when you know me, but you haven't given me a chance yet." He smirked at her, then a natural

boastfulness asserting itself, talked about money. He had lots of it to spend with her if she met him half way.

Rachel had to discipline herself to follow what he said, so actively was her brain pursuing the dogs. Three hours now since the toboggan whisked into that clump of spruce, and forty miles, she reckoned, to Aklavik, if they travelled straight. Or would the leader make for her cabin on the trap lines and stay there till—till? She pictured him labouring, breaking trail through deep snow, unfed and unled. Was she asking too much, and how long would this man keep his hands off her? It was dark now and snow falling.

"I'm going to tell you something," she said desperately, "I know who you are really. I know who set fire to Louis' store, and why. As for me, you can't have me without my killing myself: I'm not that sort; and after that you wouldn't have long to live. They'd get you and kill you very quickly. Perhaps you're a killer already; it doesn't matter. You think I'm in your hands, but you're just as much in mine. There's only one thing I'm afraid of, and that isn't death, so what are you going to do about it?"

Domert felt a revulsion. He sat gazing at her stupidly, cup poised in air. She seemed to dominate the cabin. Fear, a new strange fear was striking at his heart, and all at once all the men of the north seemed to marshal themselves in a personal body-guard for this quarter-breed girl who faced him



with such hardened defiance. He had been wrong about her, all wrong, and this made him want her more than ever.

"What am I going to do about it," he repeated almost vaguely.

"That's it, tell me."

At this a wave of impulse came over him: he threw his cards on the table, squared his elbows and looked in her eyes.

"By God! I will tell you. My name's not Domert, never mind just now what it is. You'll know later. I've got money—money to burn. Never mind where I got that either. You can burn it. I've done a lot of different things in my life: never mind about that. I never killed anyone; I never wanted to. Sometimes a man sees things pretty clearly as I see them now, and that's where you come in. I'll go back to Aklavik, and marry you when we get there. I'm white, you're a breed, so why not some straight talk. Louis's a fool; you can't live with a fool, but you could with me. And we'll go out by air, go anywhere you like. As to firing Louis' store, you're crazy. I knew nothing until next morning. As to killing yourself that's crazy too. Damned if I haven't a mind to give you a chance. But I can't see a woman killing herself because a man takes her. That's new in these parts."

"So that's it," she said slowly, "you really want to marry a woman who hates you."

"You'll get over that, and I'll take a chance on the

future. If you don't like going back to Aklavik because Louis's there, we'll push on to Alaska."

"I see." She nodded as though actually considering his proposal, amazed that he should be so blind, and searching her very soul for a means to spin out the dragging hours. Snow was still falling thinly, being driven before a rising wind, and though there was still starlight her wild sharp instinct in this confined space sensed an approaching storm, one of those harsh, biting December storms when in the north all creatures human, furred or feathered, seek for shelter. She could picture the leader of her team cease to flounder, half hesitate, then make for some protected spot, where they would all presently curl up, put their noses under their tails and sleep until the storm had passed. And by that time——!

"Well, what do you say?"

"I'll tell you to-morrow," said she summoning all her courage. "I will really."

"You'll spend the night in my shack and tell me to-morrow, eh?" His tone was sardonic. "All right, but it won't make much difference whatever you tell anyone else. Louis, for instance."

If he meant to be brutal, this misfired. The look in her face told him so, and he regretted it. She said nothing more, but went back to her corner, while he stuffed wood into the stove, now savage with himself and her. What the hell was he waiting for? In a rift of the wind he heard the bark of a wolf. Was it dog or wolf?

Dogs! Something in his brain gave a mechanical click. Rachel's dogs. Where were they? He looked at her, then looked out. Snow gleaming under the distant stars lay on the open patch between shack and bush. Nothing there. He had seen those dogs behind her as he came up, then in the thrill of capture forgotten them. Where were they now? What a blasted fool! He turned to the girl and thought he caught a spark in her black eyes. She had known all the time—been playing for time.

"To-morrow won't do," he flamed, "tell me now."

At this fear did run through her, she shrank back. "Never, never, leave me alone."

Passion overtook him, his arms shot out crushing the pliant body to him, intensifying his fire. Forcing back her head he overcame a strength that astonished him. He had not dreamed any woman could be so strong.

"To-morrow won't do," he repeated triumphantly.

In that moment it came again, fuller, rounder, deeper, the barking not of grey wolves but dogs coming down wind, straining dogs toiling through the snow. They could not be far off, he reckoned, in the direction of Rachel's trap lines. They both heard it and for a fraction of a second she ceased to struggle: she did not speak, but the brown face so close to his own became transfigured.

Fear struck more sharply into him, then he saw

red. He thrust her from him with a force that drove her head against the log wall: he heard a thud and saw her drop senseless. It took but a moment to bind her hand and foot, to tie a cloth over her mouth. Then she lay limp with no resistance.

Now he could hear a man's voice encouraging the approaching dogs not more than a scant quarter mile away, and quite certainly following Rachel's trail. What man? Domert's brain was working without any volition on his part, and he became an automaton proceeding exactly as something bade him proceed: he put out the lamp, opened one window a little, thus intensifying the outer visibility and reducing the interior of the shack to a blur in which nothing was distinct.

Next he rested his rifle on the window sill and laid his cheek to its flat glossy stock.

The moon just cleared the spruce tops, and presently he saw a man emerge in a hooded parka, a gun slung over his back; behind him another man, and behind that the team. They stopped for a moment, and in the intense silence Domert could hear the dogs panting, see the steam rising like quick little erupting geysers from their hot mouths.

The leading man came forward half way across the open still on Rachel's trail, and Domert's heart thumped as he made out that this was Britten, the constable, a tall man with a loose swinging stride. The other would be Interpreter Duck, a half breed Husky, for always the police travelled by twos or

else with an interpreter. Britten came on till he was only fifty yards away.

"Stop," barked Domert, his mouth dry, his voice seeming to explode in the silence.

Britten did stop. He crouched, swung his rifle forward and in the same moment Domert felt his own finger and thumb press together. This was also automatic, not a matter of thought and decision or even impulse. He just did it, and at the crack Britten who was on one knee cast up his head, then subsided. He lay on his right shoulder quite still.

Domert was appalled. His brain had ceased to work; he crouched there dumbfounded till another rifle cracked, and a bullet smote through the window frame beside his ear. He did not reply. Presently the other man moved forward very slowly towards Britten, when Domert fired again, but this time not to kill, and his bullet sang over the man's head. Now he, too, halted in visible uncertainty. Another shot, and he turned running towards the thick of the spruce, his short legs kicking up a flurry of snow. Then the dogs disappeared into the screen of timber and Domert heard their voices dwindling to the south.

Now he re-lit the lamp, looked at Rachel, shook her, tried to rouse her with no avail: she was prone, inert, lips a little parted. The automatic stage had deserted him, and his nerves were jumping. Presently he went out and looked down at Britten: the man did not seem to breathe, his eyes were shut, and a red

stain was spreading on his left breast from a hole in the parka.

"My God!" said the outlaw, shivering where he stood, "I'd better get out of this."

Picking up the constable's rifle, he went back to the shack: Rachel had not stirred, and the sight of her lying there gave him a strange sensation: she suggested that he had lost a good chance of—of something, that he had been in wrong from the start—from that very first day at McMurray. He suffered a profound disillusionment. Automatically he loosened her bonds, it was the first time he had touched her with gentleness.

Over him there rushed the instant need of action and escape. He had declared war on the police, and in the north such conflict could have but one end: it might not come quickly, but always it was very certain unless the fugitive could obliterate himself by swift flight to foreign territory, and even there the long strong arm of law might reach out across a friendly boundary and grasp what it sought. So one must travel fast, and travel alone. Whatever happened he must avoid Dawson City, cross the Yukon Territory and reach Alaska. No chance now of taking the woman with him.

His movements were swift: he smashed the lever action of Britten's and Rachel's rifles, stuffed food, matches, a Hudson's Bay blanket, a short handled axe with spare moccasins and duffle, and a hundred rounds of ammunition into a pack sack, strapping it

tight. He felt its weight. Heavy! But one could not do with less. For an indeterminate moment he stood beside Rachel and put a hand on her shoulder: she stirred and sighed. That gave him relief. He refilled the stove, closed the damper and turned out the lamp. No danger from fire now. At the door he halted, fingers on the wooden latch and listened. The darkness inside seemed pregnant, the warm air within these log walls tempted his body to relax and be comfortable, while outside the still figure of Britten laid in wait inviting him to pass that way if he dared.

He did pass, but avoiding Britten, and reached the edge of the ravine where it was plain that the interpreter had struck off for Aklavik to get help. A day and a half to reach there, reflected Domert, a day to get back, sixty hours' start, it ought to be enough.

The sky had become obscured, the wind was rising. Along the fringe of bush, evergreen branches were swaying gently, divesting themselves of weighted snow, but penetrating deeper all was still except a faint drone from above, and for a moment of indecision he halted till wisdom flashed and his overburdened nerves found relief.

Turning abruptly he made for the bank of Barrier River, finding as he hoped that down its centre ran a ribbon of bare ice swept clean by the wind. Here, kneeling, he took off his shoes, slung them over his shoulders, and began plodding westwards upstream, leaving no more sign of his passage than does a fly on plate glass.

Towards these northern limits also droned a Junker plane on the first Arctic flight of that winter, piloted by a young man beneath whose caribou skin parka stirred a variety of reflections. Beside him, very alert and businesslike, sat a young woman with a tilted nose and generously freckled face. She also was in Arctic garb. In the cabin, amidst a heap of mail sacks, lounged Booster, whose reactions since the machine left McMurray for the Mackenzie had for him a character entirely novel. Now the young woman touched the young man's elbow, lifted her brows at the dual control stick in front of her. He nodded, relinquished command and devoted himself to a survey of the country over which they were passing.

Across it and well ahead flitted the shadow of the plane projected by a southerly sun now shining clear, a phantom that slid in advance towards the Arctic, diaphanous forerunner of things to come. It drifted across ranks of spruce, the only hospitable feature of this wilderness, halted in regimental order at the boundaries of congealed watercourses. On the lakes and along the central core of the Mackenzie were patches of bare and glistening ice, while the immeasurable vista of swamp land flanking the great river was now a vast rink scattered with haphazard islets and patches of timber unreachable by man in any other season. But deep snow had not yet fallen.

Paula, with the controls under her own hands and feet, was exceedingly happy. She felt liberated, also



grateful. There had been no sentiment about her tuition, for Wilding spared her nothing. She had plumbed the depths of despair and scaled the heights of achievement. She had been thoroughly frightened; when she got into trouble he would grin callously, invite her to get out of it, and only take over at the very last moment. He made her clean plugs, drain the oil sump and crank the inertia starter. She got dirty, dejected, dog tired and exceedingly angry; when she thought she was doing well he found fault. When she pancaked on shivering pontoons he only laughed. Then one day when all was going wrong something happened, she never knew what, but the plane became a living thing, transmitting to her all the impulse received by its great shining body. She began automatically to interpret these because the period of reasoning was over, and instinct had begun to assert itself. After that there was no more trouble: she had good nerves and good hands.

They had flown over a small lake north of Norman when Wilding came low and pointed.

"Does that suggest anything to you?"

"No, why should it?"

"Nice kind of pilot you'll make."

"What do you mean?"

"How often have you to see a place before you register it?"

"I've never seen this before."

"Really! well that's where you tried to point out the errors of my young life, and I sent you to bed.

I never asked how you slept; had a job taking off the next morning."

She looked and laughed. That must have been years ago, and she had changed as much as this lonely lake which dropped so swiftly out of sight. Next noon, leaving behind as they passed the welcome mail bags, they reached the objective of their long flight. A good trip, with only two days lost through bad weather. Cold nights for landing when oil was immediately drained from the crank case, a portable canvas shelter housed over the cowl, an oil stove lighted beneath; still colder mornings when it took an hour to refill and warm up. Then all else forgotten in the clean glory of the air.

They were well past Fort Macpherson, and flying time reduced to a few hours of daylight, when, leaning over, she yelled: "I'm wondering where we'll find Rachel."

"We may not find her at all. She'll be on her trap lines."

"If we don't, Mrs. Burstall will ask me to stop there."

"Okay."

"How long will we stay?"

"About twenty hours—depends on the weather. Sturt wants the machine back as soon as possible."

"Sorry you've taught me?"

"I'll tell you after you've made a good forced landing. Look."

They were over a sort of meadow scattered with clumps of small timber, and a thousand feet below she saw a tiny figure in front of a pigmy dog team and toboggan. They were dots, mere specks in the landscape, and did not appear to be moving. In a flash they dropped behind, vanished, were lost.

"A trapper making for Aklavik," Wilding's lips were near her cheek. "We'll make it ourselves in ten minutes. See over there a bit to the right."

The plane began to descend, engine still full on, so that the nearing bush fled away from beneath them with increasing velocity. Ahead lay the delta of the Mackenzie, ribboned with meandering and frozen watercourses, its flat expanse crazily patterned with sealed lagoons. Now Paula could distinguish along the bend of the main stream an irregular row of little cubes that were houses, and the filigree towers of the signal station. Other specks emerged from these cubes, and began to move towards the river bank. The huge sweep of this scene was intensified by the minuteness of its human population, the pale Arctic sun already rested on the horizon, and its expiring rays, devoid of invigorating warmth, cast a chill gleam over a vast and lonely panorama.

Paula gave a little involuntary shiver. This must be the end of the world.

They came down on the river opposite Burstall's

house, and taxi-ed to shore where she found a group of familiar faces, smiling and not surprised to see her, Whitson having been in constant touch with signal stations all the way down the Mackenzie, so Aklavik knew she was coming. She shook hands with a queer feeling of how real these people were and how glad she was to be with them again. But she missed Rachel.

"Of course you're going to stay with us," said Mrs. Burstall, looking very striking in a hooded parka and mukluks.

"Thanks very much, but is Rachel here?"

"Not now, she's out on her lines; it's our turn anyway. How long can you stay?"

"Not very long I'm afraid. When do you think Rachel will turn up?"

"That's hard to say, but of course if it's important we can send for her. You'll have to wait."

Mrs. Burstall appeared faintly surprised, and Paula felt disillusioned. She had, she persuaded herself, a mission to perform in Aklavik, one that needed tact: she was prepared to handle Rachel very wisely and deftly, and make her realise certain fundamental facts. Now that she had arrived it seemed that Rachel was a trifle independent, living her own life as she thought fit, and might not take very kindly to outside interference. That was the first reaction.

"Oh, no, please don't send. I'd like to stay a few days if I may. If I don't go back with Mr. Wilding,

another plane can come in for me later. I've never been in the north in winter. This is my first taste, and how different the place looks."

Mrs. Burstall at once felt interested. She was a sensible young woman for whom life on the Mackenzie delta had become a very practical thing; having no children of her own she devoted herself to her husband, who offered himself up on the altar of duty. It was nothing new for Burstall to be roused in the middle of a stinging Arctic night by an anxious Husky who hammered at his door with a tale of trouble at Letty Harbour or Shingle Point or some other isolated spot fifty miles away on the coast. Then, donning Arctic garb, he would start out either on shoes or on a sledge, arriving at the Husky home perhaps twenty-four hours later to find nothing that warranted so arduous a journey. But he never complained, and was always ready, and the thought of him lay warm in northern hearts.

From him also Paula had welcome, and that night at supper she got the tale of the burning of Louis' store.

"Most of us believe we know who did it," he concluded, "but there's no proof. Louis had a big banknote hid under the floor, and, of course, that went too."

"Where's Louis now," she asked.

"Out on the delta trying to pick up some fur. You know his weakness for Rachel."

"Yes, I heard about it last time."

"It would relieve the local situation if she would marry him and have done with it," said Burstall smiling. "He has money enough left, and I can't imagine why she won't."

Paula hesitated a moment. "I know."

"Why?"

"She's too much in love with Mr. Wilding, and thinks he's in love with her."

Burstall shook his head. "Where did you get that original idea?"

"It's not mine, I heard it, you'll find it's right."

"Well," said the doctor, "I've known that young man for the last two years, and there's nothing in it. He wouldn't be such a fool."

"That's what I tell him."

Mrs. Burstall smiled a little: now she began to understand things better.

"I quite agree with my husband, and apart from anything else the Airways Company wouldn't like it at all. He'd have to resign, and it wouldn't do. We all like him here and know him well. If he does marry, and I don't fancy that will be for a long time yet, it will have to be some girl who understands what his job involves and will help him to live up to it. No pink and white young person would serve,—that wouldn't last any time."

"I think you're quite right," murmured Paula, wondering how well she herself knew him, and somehow thankful for her freckles. Nothing pink and

white about her. "How long should Rachel be away?"

"Are you really thinking of taking a hand in that? I wouldn't, my dear, if I were you, Rachel would be furious, while Jack wouldn't thank you. Tell me, is that why you came in?"

Paula, nodding, felt her temples a little warm, and Burstall exchanged a glance with his wife.

"People of the north," he said thoughtfully, "are a little different in some ways from those up south, perhaps more exclusive. By that I mean that influence or pressure from outside is rather resented. You might think we were pretty dependent on the Southerner, but it's only in physical things, and the rest we keep to ourselves. Apart from that, the young woman whom you quite sincerely want to help is not an ordinary person; she has the emotions of the native, not by any means ordinary emotions, with the aspirations of the whites. It's a queer mixture. You said she asked you to stay with her again. I'm sure she meant that. But if she knew what was in your mind while you were under her roof I wouldn't answer for the consequences. Now just forget that part of it, and please don't mind my speaking like this.

"Also we're quite delighted to have you with us," added Mrs. Burstall in friendly fashion, "so stay just as long as you like. I've no idea when Rachel will be back, it might be to-morrow, it might not be till Christmas."

"Is she quite by herself?"

"Oh yes, always. Tom, is Jack coming over to-night?"

"Later," he said. "Miss Deming, is it true that you learned to fly?"

"How on earth did you know?"

"Moccasin telegraph," he smiled, "and our great resource down here. I'll tell you a few queer things in that connection some other time. Now you're looking tired, you'd better go to bed. Breakfast when you want it, and this is Liberty Hall. Quiet night, isn't it?"

"I'll go up with her, Tom, what's the temperature, not that it matters much."

"Not so cold." He opened the door and examined the spirit thermometer hanging just outside. "Only fifteen—hello—someone's coming. Listen."

The air was very still and a little cloudy so that the stars looked blurred: one could see the glow of light in other houses like small reddish eyes blinking through the darkness, and at the edge of illumination from the lamp in Burstall's hands was visible the naked hull of Pituluk's schooner, pulled out for the winter.

"There, didn't you hear it?"

It sounded now quite clearly, the not distant barking of dogs, and a voice that urged them on.

"Some trapper coming in for grub," nodded Burstall. "Coming fast too; when dogs smell camp they give all they've got. Josie"—he stopped and



listened intently—"Josie, that's not a man's voice. Do you get it?"

"Yes, but I don't know it, probably one of those Louchoux Indians from Fort Macpherson; no one else would be travelling at this hour. Wait a minute and we'll see. Tom, perhaps you're wanted."

"I hope not. Here they are now."

Three minutes later Paula was staring into Rachel's drawn face, snow plastered, her thighs covered with snow, and snow whitening her shoulders: the panting dogs squatted behind her, red mouths gaping, and behind the dogs a toboggan on which was lashed what looked like a dead man, only his closed eyes being visible. The girl's dark gaze rested on the three and she swayed where she stood.

"Quick, Doctor! it's Constable Britten—I think he's alive. Domert got him." Then a pause followed by a strange, faint smile infinitely brave and weary. "Hello, Paula, I thought you'd come back—you flew right over me just about noon."

She had become conscious soon after Domert's flight and lay still, a dull ache in her head, while memory slowly returning groped till the mist began to clear. She listened, hardly breathing, and knew that she was alone. With difficulty she stood up, and felt in the gloom where matches should be on the shelf by the door, found them and lit the lamp. Doing this she made no sound. Domert had vanished, his rifle and shoes vanished with him. Her eye caught

a splintered hole in the window frame, while another had been punched through the stove pipe, and from it leaked a thin jet of smoke. Now it seemed that somewhere, not long ago, somehow she had heard shooting. At this she paused, nerves tingling, and opened the door.

A cloud drifted from the face of the moon: she could see fresh tracks making for the bush, other tracks coming from the bush, and not her own. These ended a hundred feet away where there was a figure on its side, motionless, slack feet still tangled in the wide webbed shoes. At this the last remnant of fear departed and she ran out.

The next three hours passed vividly. Britten was only just alive, and as she dragged him to the shack the congealed wound on his breast recommenced its ruddy flow. He rambled, eyes shut, and swallowed hot tea, then subsided inert, mumbling something she could not interpret, but she cut open his parka, put a pad on the bullet hole and bound it tight with a scarf under his armpits. Doing this she found another hole in his back. The bullet had passed through him.

Now there remained but one thing to attempt. Dogs! She needed dogs, and had her own team made for Aklavik? Had they made it? Or had they, which was most likely, returned to her own cabin three miles away? She pondered this, conscious that the man's life was in her hands. Should she wait or move? How long could Britten survive, and could he stand the journey to hospital?

Quite calmly she considered these points, then putting blankets over and under him, water by his side, she set out over the trail she herself had broken, passing with swift certainty through the bush till a mile from her own shack she heard a dog bark. Now the outline of her woodland home, and the leader of her team in welcome on his hind legs.

In another hour back with the toboggan to Britten, finding him excessively weak in a sort of coma, his face grey. Lest he should lose more blood, she brought the toboggan into the shack, slid him on to it by means of the lower blanket, covered him warmly, made the cross fastenings tight, and leaned over him.

"Tim, I'm going to take you back, understand? It's me—Rachel! You're all right, understand that?"

Britten's lips twitched a little, his eyes opened: he looked up at her as though from a distance, but it was plain that at first he comprehended nothing.

"Tim," she said firmly, "there's nothing to worry about. We're going to hit the trail for Aklavik."

At this he managed a faint smile, a fainter nod, so that with new hope strengthening her resolution she eased the toboggan over the door to the waiting team. Then with the urgent dogs at her heels she had struck out towards her own trap lines and the distant reaches of the lower Mackenzie.

## CHAPTER XIII

“**I**T all depends on how well he knows the country. If he happens to strike the headquarters of the Porcupine and follow that it will take him right across the Yukon where the Crow Lake detachment ought to get him before he hits Alaska, while on the other hand if he strikes the headquarters of the Peel—the two are not far apart—he is liable to get twisted, when they ought to spot him from Fort Macpherson. That’s as I see it.”

Four men were gathered in the barracks wardroom, Jenks, big, square-faced, with reddish moustache and determined expression, not a quick thinker but of dogged tenacity; Wilding, man of the air, who sat wondering how best he might help in this matter, wishing there were a few bush landing grounds towards the Yukon district; Whitson, clean shaven, quiet-eyed and very deliberate, a valued counsellor in this out-of-the-way corner of the world, where, asking no confidences, he was the recipient of many and betrayed none. Powerful of body and of a shrewd courage, he had made but few mistakes in his life, and never the same one twice, a good hunter and observer of nature. Louis, dark, restless, impatient, finding it hard to sit still, would have liked to harness up, start forthwith and take the fugitive single-handed.

On a table between them, its corners held down with pipes and pouches, was a Government map on thin paper creased with much folding: as issued, it gave the main waterways of the vicinity and little else, but from time to time there had been inserted rough pencil diagrams and pencil notes which were the results of further explorations made in recent winters by those who now examined it so closely. To the ordinary observer the thing was a geographical muddle—but to these men a very eloquent record.

Now the sound of stamping feet and Burstall came in, cheeks tingling with frost.

"How is she, doctor?" exploded Louis.

"Just waked up after twelve hours solid, and sent for Miss Deming. She'll be all right."

"And Britten," demanded Jenks.

Burstall fished out his pipe, filled and lit it. "A very near thing, but he's going to pull through; weak, of course, and I wouldn't let him talk. Heard anything of that damned interpreter?"

Whitson was again studying the map: it presented a network of rivers and streams, some of which headed towards the North Pacific Ocean, others to the Beaufort Sea, and only these men fully comprehended what might be involved in tracking a fugitive through so tangled a wilderness.

"Nothing yet," he said. "It's possible he's made for Macpherson, Domert's shack being definitely nearer there than here, which is something to go by. I've told them all we know, but of course they can't

answer. The first we hear will be from their patrol or John himself."

"It's the first time one of our interpreters ever let us down like that," rumbled Jenks resentfully. "I never thought much of those half breeds anyway."

"Yet it was a quarter breed who brought Britten in," countered Whitson.

"Yes, but she stands by herself. How much does she know about it, Doctor?"

"Not a great deal, though she's convinced that Domert is Prado. He stole a marten from one of her traps, she followed his trail, thought his shack was empty, walked right up to it and he dragged her in. There was a bit of a scrap—all right, Louis, just that, nothing else—he knocked her out. When she woke up he had disappeared, and when she found Britten she knew why. Then she went off for her dogs, and, well, we know the rest."

"You got through to Dawson City?" snapped Jenks, turning to Whitson.

"I did, and they're warning Crow Lake: anything else to arrange?"

"I'll get a pursuit posse together: this fellow won't last long."

"Think not?" Whitson's tone was dubious.

"Why should he?"

"Nothing, it's your job, not mine, but I'm here to help."

"What's on your chest?"

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"Well," said the staff sergeant slowly, "what strikes me is this. You've got a big area several thousand square miles about which not much is known in spite of what's on this map. Somewhere inside it you've got a desperado scared stiff: he's stolen fur, attacked a woman, and what's worse thinks he's killed a policeman. That's a death warrant and he knows it. He seems good in the bush, he's well armed. He's certainly aware he's outlawed, and, therefore, he'll shoot on sight. Now the first job is to find, if we can, in what part of that area he is, and the next to get him without loss of further life except perhaps his own."

This, given with the assurance of one who knew the Arctic much better than any of the others, produced a sobering effect, and the drone of wind sweeping up the delta sharpened the picture already taking shape in their minds. Broken weather was at hand when inland travel must be slow, and in that country one might easily be within a few feet of the pursued and yet know nothing of it. More snow would obliterate all tracks except in thick bush, and reasonably rapid progress be possible only along the frozen rivers where one offered an open target from the timbered banks.

"I might spot him from the air," said Wilding suddenly. "He's got to cross the open if he moves at all, so if I follow the streams it might help. That's about all I could do, but if he sticks to the bush, I haven't a chance."

"That's right too." Jenks nodded approvingly. "Do you need any special authority?"

"Yes, you'd better get your Inspector at Fort Smith to wire Edmonton, then the base will wire me, for it's going to hold up the south bound mail."

"Mail be damned for the time being. Can't they send another plane on?"

"Possibly, I don't know. Is there anything else to be thought of right now?"

"That radio local broadcast?" suggested Whitson. "What shall I say, Jenks?"

"Tell everybody just what's happened, that we take it that Domert—explain the Prado end of it—is heading for the boundary, that he'll have no dogs, but there'll be big money on him. Warn everybody that he's desperate, and wanted for attempted murder and other offences."

"Better put all that down on paper, hadn't you, under the circumstances."

Jenks, nodding, began to write, frowning, screwing up his lips, thinking at the same time that at last he had a real job on, much removed from anything that had come his way so far, and could he pull it off—well—it wouldn't be overlooked in Ottawa. Louis sat silent wondering about Rachel, aching to see her, and watched Wilding with smothered resentment. That young pilot was wearing Rachel's gift, but seemed quite forgetful of her, interested only in the map and its pencil jottings.

"Here you are," said Jenks, pushing over a slip



of paper to Whitson. "I've made it clear that the pursuit posse will start from here just as soon as that interpreter comes in or any word from him. How about dog teams?"

"There's yours, the Hudson's Bay, Louis' and the Oblates': that's enough, isn't it?"

"Should be. Well, you fellows had better get some sleep when you can. Let me know what the Inspector says."

Whitson nodded and went out; Jenks began to make entries in his diary, and Louis looked urgently at the doctor who knew quite well what he wanted, but Rachel had told him that she would like to see Wilding and no one further that day.

"You needn't be troubled," he said in a kindly fashion, "she's taken no harm at all, only a lump on her head."

"I guess maybe I'd like to speak with her, monsieur."

"Later on. Not just now, better to-morrow. Jack, why not come over to us for a while? My wife would be glad to see you. Good night, everyone."

The two went out, leaving Louis standing, when Burstall put his arm into Wilding's. "Look here, it's Rachel who wants you, not me. Understand?"

"Why me?"

"I think you know," replied the doctor candidly. "I think I know too. She was wandering a bit before she went to sleep and talking about you. One doesn't need anything more."

"It is a bit of a mix-up," confessed the young man both moved and troubled. "I don't know what to do. There's nothing I can do except pull out, and I'd hate that for several reasons."

"Has she anything to go on, any justification? You mustn't tell me unless you want to."

"Well, she made this damned parka and I took it: there was a bit of a love scene, mostly on her part, and no doubt, yes, I did say more than I should have."

"Nothing else has happened between you?"

"Lord, no."

"Your word on it?"

"Certainly, nothing whatever: no intimacy—if that's what you mean."

"Well that's something to be thankful for. Nothing in writing, of course?"

"Nothing, nor did she ever write to me."

"I'm glad of that." They had reached Burstall's house where they halted and he gave Wilding a straight look. "The matter is a bit unusual. This girl is deeply in love with you, also she has Indian blood, and I being Indian agent as well as medical officer she is in my charge. She's a ward of the Government, and I'm responsible for her. She never took treaty money, but that doesn't alter my position in the matter. That's that. I see the situation as quite impossible for you, but at present her mental condition is such that were you to do any-

thing—well—anything that she thought unfeeling, she'd quite possibly do away with herself."

"It's as bad as that?" asked Wilding startled.

"I think so. She has just escaped from assault by a man she hated and feared, and from her ramblings I gathered that she was, in a way, saving herself for you. That may sound fantastic, and perhaps it is, but the fact remains. She didn't know she was talking in any such fashion, but what I take to be the truth came out. She's been under a great strain, mental and physical, and you've simply got to play your part. If it misleads her as to your real feelings, it can't be helped, and the future must take care of itself. But don't on any account hurt her now. You'd better go over, do your best and," added Burstall with a wicked little smile, "don't let the presence of the other girl cramp your style."

Wilding felt nettled. He didn't want to hurt her, and his steps dragged a little. "Damn all women," he thought, then, involuntarily, excepted one who was not Rachel. At once when he entered, Rachel came across to him and in the most natural manner imaginable put up her face to be kissed. He flushed, brushed her cheeks with his lips, felt like a fool and glanced at Paula. That young woman seemed to regard this greeting quite unperturbed.

"Hullo, Jack, have a good sleep?"

"So, so," he said, "and you?"

"Gorgeous! I was dead to the world. Rachel's

been telling me all about what's happened: it's perfectly thrilling."

Wilding pulled himself up. It was queer, he thought, to see these two together like this, and wondered what sort of bond had been created between them, for without doubt there was something in the air, something atmospheric and quite beyond him.

"A bit too thrilling for comfort?" he hazarded, "eh, Rachel?"

She nodded. "I don't want to talk about that part of it any more unless I have to—to the police."

"You'll have to later on, all right. Jenks is getting ready to start now." He spoke brusquely, feeling himself in some kind of a net, invisible but very clinging.

"Did you see me yesterday when you flew right over me? I knew it was you."

"I saw someone, but couldn't tell who it was. I couldn't have landed there, anyway."

"I thought the Corporal was dying then, he couldn't speak and his eyes stayed shut. Now"—here she took a long sigh of relief—"doctor says he's going to get well again. And Paula has come back—I am so glad."

"It's the last thing in the world I expected," said Paula.

"I felt you would come, but didn't know why. Isn't that queer?"

Her voice was quiet, but had the vibration of

nerves on edge, and while one part of him was in rebellion, another warned Wilding to be very tactful. Why didn't Paula help, instead of looking merely faintly amused and exceedingly interested.

"I've been teaching her to fly," said he desperately, "she made a great pupil, too."

"And you'll teach me next summer, won't you?"

"Of course he will," said Paula briskly. "I'll be having my own machine in Vancouver, and," she added, "I hope you'll come and see me there, both of you."

"I'd like that very much. Now we'll have tea—it's funny you know, but here in the north there are no hours for tea—we just have it at any time."

She went into the next room and Wilding's mounting resentment boiled over.

"I say, what's the matter with you two?"

"Nothing whatever."

"What has she been telling you?"

"Oh that! It was all very simple and human about her life in the north; and how everything changed for her after you began to fly down here, and how you always came in to see her, and had a meal or something, and you got to know each other better and better and she made you that parka, told you she loved you, and how you said the same thing, and since then she's been awfully happy in one way but doesn't quite understand your attitude in another. She got frightened about me, and of course I told her there was nothing whatever in

that, so now we're great friends and I think that's all."

"I see." Wilding gave way to rising hostility because it was all so true and left him squirming. "So you told her there was nothing in that?"

"There isn't, is there?" said Paula cheerfully. "At least I didn't know there was anything, did you?"

He glowered at her, helpless. "You like rubbing things in, don't you?"

"You asked me and I told you. Was Rachel exaggerating at all?"

"No, not exactly."

"Do you remember the last time—I believe there'd been a forced landing somewhere—when I spoke of this and was asked kindly to attend to my own affairs?"

"Did I put it that way?"

"Something very like it. Well, I did, and didn't really see the thing as it is till this evening. Now I don't suppose," here she gave him an undecipherable look, "there's anything anyone else can do about it."

Wilding, frowning, left his chair, and began to pace the room like a caged leopard.

"I'm in the devil of a hole," he confessed.

"You certainly look it. Well."

"And I certainly don't want to hurt Rachel: Burstall says she's all unstrung."

"You certainly mustn't—I quite agree."

"So if I don't play up she'll crack—and if I do, it's all a bluff."

Paula smiled a little. "You mean you'd sooner be making love to someone else?"

He stopped pacing and turned towards her with unabashed eagerness. "Yes, if you want to know, and——"

"Tea is ready," said a low voice behind him. "I'm afraid I've been a—a long time, but the water wouldn't boil. We'll have it in here."

The two went in sharing a sense of disloyalty, united in discomfort: here they sat under this generous roof, welcomed with the hospitality of the north which is stronger than any written law of man, yet searching their brains to shatter, if as mercifully as possible, the dreams of the woman whose spontaneous kindness now surrounded them. They felt evasive and ashamed, but however much or little Rachel might have heard nothing showed in her face except an expression of extreme fatigue. She seemed only to avoid their eyes, to be distraught, occupied in her own thoughts: she was very gentle, and her manner had lost the simple, primitive confidence that was her principal characteristic.

It was after supper and still in the same unnatural calm that she asked Wilding a strange question: she was sitting on the floor, Indian-fashion, her head against his knee.

"Jack, do you sometimes have a feeling, a certain feeling that something that"—here she hesitated,

"that is happening now is not new, but has happened before—as though you were doing it for the second time?"

"No," he said, wondering not a little.

"You, Paula, do you feel that ever?"

"I have sometimes, but don't think I was very much impressed. Do you feel it?"

"Yes, now, to-night." She looked about at them, at the cabin she knew so well, with its painted, white-chinked log walls, stained ceiling of match board, coloured prints, big fireplace, dark red carpet and easy chairs. All of it except the logs had come down on *The Distributor*, and even the logs themselves were water-borne for hundreds of miles by the Mackenzie in flood till they reached Aklavik to be boomed and hauled out, treasure-trove for local use. No such trees grew anywhere near the Arctic.

"It is like that to-night," she went on, with a pathetic gesture. "I see you here with me, we three alone together for the first time. Then something tells me that it is not the first time, and it is that I cannot understand."

Wilding, feeling anxious for her, caught Paula's glance. She looked at the door and nodded.

"Rachel, you're tired out," said he rising. "I'll be off. Sleep the clock round, and you'll be all right."

"But no, not yet, there are so many things in my mind to-night—I have more thoughts than



words. Did you ever hear an Indian conjuror—a very wise man—tell what was going to happen?”

“No, but I’ve heard old-timers talk about it: I don’t hold to it very much myself.”

“And for you, Paula?”

“I don’t think he’d be any more wise if he undertook anything of that sort,” said she sagely.

“But there are such men with my people. A conjuror will build himself a little lodge of brush and poles with a skin roof—the poles are very stiff, and deep in the ground so that strong men cannot move them. Then he will go inside with his drum. Presently he will beat it and sing, and the whole house shakes, and by and by he will come out, very tired, with sweat on his face and tell the tribe what will soon happen. Always he is right. This is not just a story, it is true. Or else he will go away by himself, far, not eating anything for many days, and there he will dream dreams, in which what is going to happen will come to him. Last night I dreamed like that.”

Her voice, her attitude, the slow ordering of her speech attracted their attention: she did not appear to be addressing them so much as releasing from her mind misty memories which lurked there, overlaid till now by what she had acquired from her white blood and white associations. She was visibly reverting to the Indian: that portion of her nature was now asserting itself, demanded utterance and never before had Wilding known her give way like this.

Paula felt deeply impressed. The isolation of her setting, the log walls against whose warm massiveness chill winds from the Beaufort Sea pressed in vain, the frozen leagues stretching between them and the rest of the world, the consciousness that only by air could that outer world be regained, the unreadable look on Rachel's face, her tawny colouring, the silk-embroidered parka on the floor beside Wilding, the low murmur from the stove and, above all, her own uncertainty as to the future: all this created in her a conviction that she was on the edge of happenings far different from anything she might have conceived a few weeks ago.

"What did you dream?" she asked in a low tone. "Do tell us."

"I cannot tell that—it is my dream—for me only. Also there was something I thought I knew, but I did not know, I only thought so. Also something I must do, so I will do it now."

She rose from the floor in one smooth, graceful motion, went into her bedroom and they heard a drawer opening. Then a pause of complete silence till she came back and dropped something into Paula's lap.

"It was that. A present for you," she said with a grave smile. "That was part of the dream. The rest does not matter yet."

Paula stared, incredulous. There laid on her knee a long marten stole made of perfect skins, dark, glossy, silky in texture, such fur as a trapper takes

but seldom in a lifetime, and for which he may make his own price when he does. It had the peculiar depth and richness of sable, and would certainly have been marked as a Siberian product in any shop window of London or Paris. Here was a royal offering.

"But I can't take this," said she in astonishment. "Rachel, please, you mustn't. It's worth far too much."

"I would not give anything not worth having, and the rest does not matter. Also I do what the dream tells me. This is the second dream—the first was about a parka."

She did not look at Wilding as she said this; that affair had been disposed of, it belonged to the past, and now she was occupied with what she recognised to be an urgent duty of the present.

"No," she went on, firmly, "you must take it. I have not anything else that would do as well for you except one thing, and about that you will learn before long. We will not talk of this any more to-night."

Wilding, now quite confused, got up and reached for his parka.

"Well, Rachel, you certainly do things handsomely. This particular garment is the best I've ever struck."

"I'm glad." Again as might a child she put up her face to be kissed, but offered no kiss of her own, while Paula racked her brain for some glimpse

of what lay behind so strange a moment. Its significance eluded her. If ever she saw love in a woman's face, she now saw it in Rachel's, but it was a love without any joy. The girl moved as if in a dream: Wilding was flushing and there followed one of those tense, poignant moments out of which sudden flashing events sometimes emerge. It was broken by a shuffling of feet outside, a knock, when Jenks came in bringing blasts of icy air and looking exceedingly businesslike. Nodding to the others, he turned to Wilding.

"Just got word from the base, Jack. Inspector at Fort Smith has arranged with your people for your services so long as required. My idea is that you take off as soon as it's light enough, to see if you can spot Domert's tracks from the air. Better come to the barracks and talk things over before you start."

## CHAPTER XIV

GOING across to the station the two men leaned hard against the press of wind from a storm that gathered in the north-west under a dark and wintry sky. In the wireless office, Whitson sat at the key desk, his fingers tilting while the staccato of Morse sounded sharply. By the stove stood John Duck, the Husky interpreter, just arrived from Fort Macpherson. His expression suggested that he had had scant mercy from the Corporal. Booster sat eyeing the man with cynical curiosity, and beside him was Louis.

Jenks jerked his chin at the man. "He took it that Britten was dead, and says that Domert shot at him, too, so he made for Macpherson, that being nearer. I've told him what I think about his actions. Two constables from The Peel are probably at the shack now, and picking up Domert's trail. If they get it they'll follow it but he's had a long start. Whitson, Louis, John and I are starting at daybreak with two teams. Now what about you?"

"Dunno, it depends on the weather and that doesn't look too good: no use taking off in a snow-storm."

"That's for you to say."

"I'd only crash getting down again. My best line is to follow the water-courses, and chance his coming

out on one of them; or I might spot smoke, if he isn't bright enough to use dry wood. It's a bit of a contract any way you look at it. How's Britten getting on?"

"Picking up fast. Now look here." Jenks turned to the map. "There's The Rat River, The Porcupine, The Peel and The Barrier. Can you land on any of them?"

"Probably, yes, if I find a fairly straight stretch."

"Well, we'll have three posses out, one being from Macpherson, with two men and four dogs each. You can't mistake 'em. Domert has no dogs. We'll be seeing you, but you're not so likely to spot us, as we'll keep to the bush all we can. If it happens you do pick up one single figure, make some banking turns and dip your wings, and we won't miss that. The rest is up to us. If it gets late and nothing happens, you'd better come back here for the night. The Inspector has wired Crow Lake and Dawson City, telling them what's being done. Anything else, Whitson?"

"Our dogs will have enough to pull, so I think he'd better bring plenty of grub and some bedrolls. If he has to make a forced landing he's liable to stay there for a while. Got a rifle, Jack?"

"Yes."

"Better take it along. Domert'll know what you're there for, and will act accordingly, so I wouldn't fly too low. That fellow can shoot. If you caught him out on one of the rivers, you might pot him from

the air, but that's not likely. He'll hear you coming and make for cover. It's something like finding a flea in a hair carpet, and it's a pretty smart flea this time. Anything in your mind, Booster?"

There was a good deal, but Booster shook his head; he greatly relished the immediate prospects. Man-hunt! Now and again with Wilding he had trailed men by air, but those were mercy flights to save the lost, sick or injured, while this trip had another colour. It would be discussed all through the north, be followed by radio, written in the press and give its participants something to remember.

"Guess I'll give the bus a look over," said he and went out.

"Anything more about that local broadcast for more men?" asked Whitson of the Corporal.

"I'm not for it, yet. We could call say twenty fellows out, but they'd only advertise their presence with more noise, more camp-fires, more confusion. If we get Domert located in a given area, perhaps cornered in a spot easy to hold and hard to fetch him out of, that's the time for more help. What do you say?"

"I think you're right, and as I see it we're lucky if there's no loss of life except his own. We won't take him alive, that's certain. Did you get any statement from Rachel?"

"Burstall said to let her alone for the present."

"Anything you want to say, Louis? This meeting's going to break up."

Louis was in deep water, torn between jealousy and wrath; he had not seen Rachel since the moment when her dogs halted at the hospital and Britten's limp body was carried inside—then she was too tired to talk. But since then she had seen Burstall, sent for the Deming girl, and he knew that Wilding had been there too, so it seemed that everyone but himself was welcome.

As for Domert, he now wished he had killed the man long ago. Such fragments of the story as he had gathered inflamed his thoughts. It was hard to believe that Rachel had escaped as he was told, and for Domert, having laid hands on her, he swore a black oath of revenge. Now he had no store to occupy him and was glad of it. He would get Domert if it took all winter.

So when the Corporal asked if he had anything to say Louis looked up, eyes dark with resolution and showed his teeth like a dog.

*"Nom de Dieu!* What is the use of saying anything in such affair? You make the arrangements—she's all right. But just so soon as we see that man you let me shoot first, that's all I want. Now I go to see to the dogs."

On the way back he passed Rachel's cabin, and could not but stop. He hesitated, then knocked.

"Yes, come, who is it?"

He stood on the threshold, closing the door against the wind, waiting awkwardly hat in hand, fumbling



for speech. A thousand things were in his heart, all the promptings of love and devotion, but at the sight of her something choked him and the words would not come. Aware of Paula's presence, he did not even glance in her direction, but kept his eyes on Rachel as though she were something other than human.

"I guess," he stammered, "I just come to make sure you're all right."

"Of course I am, Louis, don't you see—I'm only tired."

"She's one hard trip you make eh, with that fellow on the toboggan?"

"Very hard, but it's all over now. Did you get any fur on the delta?"

"I don't think very much about fur just now: going to feed the dogs. We start pretty soon, and by Gar! you look all use up. Better hit the pillow, Chérie, I hope we have success, eh?"

"We will, just as quick as we can—both of us."

At this reminder of Paula, he turned, gave a stiff little bow, fingered his cap and disappeared. Rachel made a little gesture as though sending him good luck, then shook her head slowly, sat down and put her hands over her face. At once Paula was beside her.

"Do go to bed now, you're tired out."

"I know, that doesn't matter. I'm so glad you're here; I'm so lonely."

Paula was deeply moved. In the last few hours her

thoughts about this girl had undergone a readjustment; now Rachel seemed a pathetic creature struggling gallantly against conditions she could never conquer, a composite woman with a strong courageous spirit, yet weak because she had given away her heart and got nothing in return. In this issue, and because she had been too proud to cultivate what few white women there were in Aklavik, she had none to turn to. She stood alone amongst men.

Paula trying to imagine herself in such a situation failed completely. Rachel knew, no doubt about it now, that in building on Wilding's love, she had builded on sand, and the structure in her heart had dissolved. Louis meant nothing to her, and in this hour of disillusionment she was appealing to the girl whom she had feared from the first and whom she saw that Wilding did love; more than that, she had pressed upon her visitor her most treasured possession. Now, fingering the lovely thing in her lap, light as air, soft as down, Paula grew more and more distressed. Was not this the gift of impulse and desperation?

"Rachel!" her voice was very gentle, "won't you stop thinking and go to bed? Please do that—and—please—I mustn't take this fur, I want you to keep it always."

Rachel, not appearing to hear this, was looking at the stove. "You have never been on any trap lines, have you?"

"No."

"Perhaps before you go back I will take you out on mine. That end skin, a good judge of fur would say it was just a little finer and darker than the others though you could not tell the difference. I remember when I took that marten two years ago. I could hear the chain rattle before I reached him, for he was in the trap by one foot and eating his own sinew to escape. In a little while he would be gone. When I came up he looked at me with small, pink frightened eyes—he knew it was too late—so I put my foot on him pressing hard into the snow and soon he stopped struggling. His heart was dead."

"It sounds cruel," said Paula, not a little horrified.

"Trapping is cruel—always—and to-night, I'm something like that marten, so I cannot wear its skin. Also I cannot struggle any more for my heart is also dead."

She said this quite calmly, accepting it as something settled and not to be fought or disputed, so that Paul longed to put her arms round her, whispering words of comfort: but no comfort from another would have been welcome. One could see that. This affair had happened, it was part of everything else, so the strange fatalism in the girl's wild blood came to the surface and met the situation as she had met all others.

"Rachel, dear, is there nothing I can say or do?"

"No, not anything, now it is all said and done. You will take the fur from me, from someone who at first did not like you at all, but now likes you very

much, and before you start south I will show you how that marten was trapped.

"I—I'd be very interested—if you think it safe."

"Of course it is safe: all the others will be a long way from there in the Yukon country and," she added, "my real home is in the woods. You are not afraid?"

"Not at all. I was thinking whether it's wise for you so soon."

"But I am more happy there than anywhere else. You will see for yourself, also you will be warm and comfortable and I will teach you a great deal. It will tire you at first, so rest well."

This was final—definite—no suitable answer seemed possible, so Paula only nodded. Rachel was on her feet now, moving briskly with no shadow in her eyes. She was a different creature, capable, alert, assured.

"Then good night, Rachel."

"Good night, my new friend. You will be in my room again. No—I will sleep here—I often do."

Paula lay awake for a long time; she had lived fast during these past few hours, had a glimpse into a phase of life that heretofore she did not dream existed, and seen an exhibition of courage the depth of which she only partly comprehended. She had seen in action the mingling of white and native blood that is so hard to interpret fairly with its queer surprising impulses, its contradictions, its variations, its Indian generosity and stoicism, and she felt somehow

that Rachel had extracted the best from both sources of her being. She had in a dream perceived what she took to be her own destiny and accepted this, whatever it was, without question. Could any white woman have done better?

It might have been ten o'clock next morning, when the skies paled a little over the flat arc of the Arctic sun, that Paula, half-waking, caught the drone of a Junker plane passing directly above the cabin. Wilding had embarked on his man-hunt.

In thirty minutes the machine covered a journey that took Rachel as many arduous hours: it was now over the winding course of Barrier River, and Wilding, who had committed to memory as much as he could of that complicated chart, surveyed a corner of the north that was new to him, since it lay west of the direct route between Aklavik and Fort Macpherson. He saw a maze of country, patches of bush alternating with meadows that in summer were impassable swamps, saw how The Porcupine and Peel took their birthplaces close to each other before separating one for the Pacific, one for the Arctic ocean. From his present altitude the land below looked quite flat, though he knew it to be otherwise, and westwards the skyline was broken by irregular white lumps, the north-easterly spur of the Rocky mountains. Beyond this lay Alaska.

Leaving Aklavik by moonlight, the others had five hours' start, but with utmost speed they could

not arrive here before night-fall: somewhere far behind they were pushing on with the toiling dogs, and somewhere, certainly more to the west, must be Domert. Given reasonable endurance and intelligence, the odds, Wilding felt, were on the fugitive. It seemed ridiculous to be circling here two thousand feet above the earth and expect somewhere, somehow, to distinguish one solitary human speck, in this tree-covered wilderness.

But against that was the curious fact that in the tale of the north men have found it more difficult to lose themselves in these solitudes than in great cities. Here the human unit had identity and distinction; it could not do anything, it could not even light a fire, without leaving its record, nor could it move without registering its trail. The smell of a camp fire was wind-carried for miles, the emanation of near-by humanity an elusive but inescapable thing. But for the pilot poised above the earth, clues were faint. Save perhaps for a thread of smoke climbing out of a screen of trees, the air had no eyes for what might be concealed beneath; and at this moment Domert himself might well be looking up at the plane through an interlacing roof of green and white, smiling derisively at the thought of recapture.

"There's a new shack over there, sir, but more to the north," grunted Booster.

Wilding turned, side-slipped, dropped to a few hundred feet and flew past it. Not having seen it before, he noted the open ground around, the belt

of cottonwood screening it from The Barrier. The cottonwoods were bare, slender spindles that carried no snow, and the spruce on either side was heavily laden. He took the shack to be standing in a depression, its roof below the level of the surrounding terrain, and here he realised was Rachel's temporary prison. Hither also, the pursuit posse would be pressing, and he wanted to study the spot, for it might be that he could land on the frozen stream nearby. Still lower, he made out tracks—three distinct trails—all leading to the small building from different directions. Banking again and dropping still lower, he sped thirty feet above the rigid avenue of The Barrier, vaulting over projecting points where it curved sharply, tracing its narrow, sinuous course between high clay banks steeply pitched and covered with wind-packed snow.

Thus engaged, feeling the quivering machine that answered so sweetly to the controls, his goggled eyes constantly busy, he had a sharp sense of liberation. The unbelievable thing had happened, and he was free! the sensation was like that of discarding an encumbering garment. It had not been calculated or premeditated, it just happened, and it wouldn't have come about had Paula not been there, so he felt grateful. Also it was good that Rachel remained his friend: he didn't ask why he should be so sure of this, or understand her well enough to sense what it meant to her; all he knew—and this proved enough—was that Rachel had made the other girl

a royal present and bore no ill-will. That was just her impulsive nature, and to-day her talk about dreams and the future did not sound so impressive; it was only part of her queer romanticism, and for the rest of it probably she had been no more in real earnest than himself.

Thus argued young Wilding as he sped at a hundred miles an hour criss-crossing a silent, expressionless north looking for a man who—well—Whitson was right when he talked about a flea in a hair carpet.

Searching for Rachel's hunting cabin—he reckoned it was within a few miles of Domert's—he could not find it because she had built in a thick bush protected from every wind and with plenty of firewood available.

"Think we can get down on that creek, Tom? I've a mind to try, we might need it."

Booster, who had been prospecting for possible landing grounds, gave a nod. "There's a run of three hundred and fifty yards with a jump over a bit of point and very little timber, that's next the first bend above the shack. You'll make it all right."

Wilding, to his satisfaction, made it without trouble, and sped off on another fruitless circuit while the earth mocked him. He was now well into the Yukon country, not far from the Alaskan boundary and aware that the pursuit party from Aklavik could not yet have reached his present neighbourhood. Nor were there any signs of aid from the west. He flew low over swamps and



meadows but nowhere did the shining surface show any distinguishable trail. Finally he turned back towards Aklavik, landing there just as the light failed altogether. The first man he met was Burstall.

"See anything, Jack?"

"Not a thing except Domert's shack: I flew over that—it's empty. The weather's pretty spotty."

"Humph! I don't suppose he'll ever see it again—no smoke, nothing anywhere else?"

"The open country was as bare as your hand. You can't do a great deal in five hours' flying time. How's Britten?"

"Fine, it's a clean wound. Coming in for supper?"

"I thought I'd go round to Rachel's."

"No supper there. She and that Deming girl set out this morning for the trap lines, and will be away three or four days anyway."

"That's a bit risky, isn't it, considering?"

"Domert?"

"Well, yes."

"No risk at all. They've seen the last of each other. If Domert hasn't reached the Alaskan boundary he's not far from it, and going hard. We'll have to depend on the Americans for the rest of it."

"But Miss Deming is green to the woods—she can't stand a trip like that."

"She may be green, but she's in good form, and full of ginger. I saw them just before they started about five hours ago. Anyway, Rachel won't let her kill herself."

"Oh hell!"

"What's up now?"

"I don't like the idea at all."

"Is she in your charge?" smiled the doctor.

"I don't know about that, sometimes I think I'm in hers."

"Well, you needn't worry this time: those young women are all right. By the way, your guardian or ward, whichever she is, left a note for you. It's at the house. Come in, you look cold."

Wilding read the note between gulps of blistering tea.

"Dear Jack,—Of course you'll think I'm crazy, which is nothing new, but anyway I'm going with Rachel to her hunting cabin for a little real bush experience. We won't be away long. She says you'll probably fly over us, so we'll be on the look-out. We've had the strangest talk I've ever had with anyone, and I'm terribly sorry for her. I'll tell you about it when we meet. Don't be furious at my going off like this, but I feel like a snake that's shedding its old skin and coming out in a new one. You may hardly know me. I've wired to Vancouver to put father at ease in case exaggerated reports come out in the papers about events down here. You'll notice I say down and not up, so I'm getting on. See you in a few days.

"Yours sincerely,  
"PAULA."

With this was enclosed a scrap from Rachel.

"Dear Jack,—We'll be at my shack, three miles northwest of Domert's. You won't see mine easily from the air, the bush is too thick, but his is in a clear spot, behind a bunch of cottonwoods at the east end of the only straight stretch of the Barrier River. You can't miss

that, all the rest is crooked. You'll be surprised at not finding us at Aklavik, but I simply have to get back to the woods for a little while. Don't be anxious about Paula, I'll take good care of her and like her very much. I think you two might be very happy. Don't worry about me, that's all right now.

“RACHEL.”

P.S.—“At noon, the day after to-morrow I'll burn some green birch and you'll see the smoke.”

Wilding slept but little that night. Next day was dull, with low, snow-laden clouds and a ceiling just over the treetops. Dubiously he went up to three thousand feet only to find the same conditions, was thankful to get back without crashing, and spent the rest of the half-lit hours cursing his own ineffectiveness as a scout. Travel on the earth was feasible, but no man might take to the air and not be lost in a few moments. To kill time he went to the Signal Station, got through to McMurray and learned that Scott was in bed under doctor's orders. Later he would go south on leave.

Trappers and hunters had disappeared, leaving Aklavik populated only by permanent residents. He visited the Oblates, talked with the Fathers and learned that Pituluk had started east along the coast of the Beaufort Sea with Oomgah, his wife, and Pyak, The Latecomer, his youngest son, from whom Oomgah refused to be separated: also he had taken the portable drill and expected some profitable dental surgery *en route*. Next a visit to Britten in hospital, now recovering rapidly, and fuming that he was

missing the man-hunt. Then back to the doctor's house, where they listened in to the Empire broadcast from London, and jazz from Hollywood. Finally to bed and confused dreams in which Paula alternately defied and loved him.

Next day the weather looked better, and he got off before a sickle edge of sun brought a pale flush to the grey horizon. It was now two days since the pursuit posse had started: he reckoned they would be on the Porcupine and Peel headwaters, so made straight for this area, and, swinging to the south in order to pass over Domert's shack, he saw on his right before he reached it, a wisp of smoke and headed for that. At five hundred feet he distinguished a tiny clearing in tall spruce, a small square, snow-laden roof, and in front two diminutive figures with gesticulating arms. Now he felt happier though it was queer to be looking for an outlaw and the girl he loved at the same time. Then he flew on to the west, criss-crossing the country till an hour later he was relieved to spot Jenks and Louis on a small lake. There was just room to get down. He circled low, Jenks waved, and Wilding, landing in a flurry of snow, kept the engine ticking over. The Corporal strode up to him.

"Seen anything yet?"

"Not a thing."

"Well, an hour ago we got on to what Louis says is Domert's trail—Louis recognises the shoes. The fellow's heading due west for Alaska all right. We're

on the south side of him and Whitson is on the north. The best thing you can do is to scout ahead and let us know if you spot him—he can't be so far off. What about that Fort Macpherson lot?"

"I know they're out, but that's all. I haven't seen anything of them. There was no ceiling yesterday, and I couldn't do anything myself."

"Can you camp with us to-night?"

"No, I'll have to get over to Aklavik to refuel: back first thing to-morrow."

"Right! we'll make another ten miles to-day, and put out a bush arrow-head on the ice so that you can see it. You can follow us that way. When you reach Aklavik, report what's going on to the Inspector at Fort Smith, and ask if there's anything further from Dawson or Crow Lake. Better get away now, the weather looks a bit thick. Good luck."

Wilding climbed, but not fast. While they talked his ceiling had suddenly lowered to a hundred feet above the tree-tops and he sped over these, making a bee-line north-east for Aklavik, while Booster sat frowning, peering this way and that, pushing out his lips in a manner he had when inwardly disturbed and finally, an unusual thing for him, ventured a suggestion.

"Just as well we spotted that stretch of the Barrier, eh?"

Wilding nodded, for the same thought was in his mind. Now the air was darker and one could see advancing the skirts of a driving blizzard: it

looked white yet dark, opaque yet massive, soft yet impenetrable; a great whirling shroud suspended from an invisible sky, blotting out the world in its soundless course. It had no dimensions and it was everywhere.

"That shack of Domert's would look pretty good to me for to-night," added the engineer pensively. "It ain't so far from the other one either; suppose we can make it?"

Wilding grinned at him. Three miles at most, of travel through the bush if the weather cleared later, as it probably would. Then a wonderful few hours. In the morning he would hop over to Aklavik, refuel, bring back an extra supply of gas with him, and make Domert's cabin his headquarters while this hunt lasted.

"We've got to make it," said he.

Booster signified entire approval. Immune himself from feminine attraction, because, he argued, women had no sense of humour and were too damned fussy about things that didn't matter, he had been vastly interested in the situation developing between his pilot and Paula Deming. He had missed nothing, and Wilding, he decided, was doomed from the start. In a way he regretted this, because it meant the finish of a good man, but there was a certain satisfaction in watching a fish circling fatuously round a hook before it lunged for the bait. Wilding had already done a good deal of circling and would lunge before long.

A tricky job that landing, with some scientific guessing about one's height from the ground, but the Junker settled comfortably, skidded and came to rest with her propeller within three feet of the bank. Wilding took a breath of relief when the two climbed out. The belt of cottonwoods just distinguishable above them afforded protection from the wind, but beyond that he could see nothing. From the fuselage Booster dumped the mooring ropes, the canvas hood, and handed out the oil heater.

In half an hour the plane was safe for the night against any storm; shrouded in a thickening mantle of white that clung to struts, wings and elevator, she became part of the landscape, losing her naked outline, blending with a fleecy background so that only the clean thin blades of her propeller suggested that her real habitation was the air.

Booster regarded his work with contentment. The plane once secure, oil drained into two cans, the rest meant little to him: he was used to sleeping where night found him, on a sand-bar, in the lee of a rock, or in the bush; for comfort he needed no housing, and where he landed there was home. As for a night in the shack, that spelled luxury, so now he stuffed food, candles, kettle and tin dishes into a pack sack, handed this with an axe to Wilding, flung the bedrolls over his shoulder, and picked up the two oil-cans.

"This way to the Ritz Hotel, sir, follow me."

It was heavy work for laden men, and they moved slowly: there was no visible trail: clear of the cotton-woods the snow lightened a little and the shack became visible with dark walls and a white crown: one could see the window from which Britten must have been shot, and, reflected Booster, there would be a lot of stuff here that Domert certainly couldn't have carried off with him. Reaching the door, balancing the bedrolls on his broad back, he kicked it impatiently.

The door sprang open. The two, blinking into the sudden brilliant ray of a flashlight, stared at the muzzle of a revolver. Then Domert's voice, ragged, high-pitched:

"Come in, you damned fools: I've been waiting for you an hour past."

A second pause, till Booster with an oath dropped his burden and plunged forward. The revolver barked once, and he pitched headlong. He lay still.

"Hands up, young fellow, and come in. I need you and that plane."

Wilding moved forward in a daze. Now Domert backing away, revolver still levelled, the torchlight still dazzling, indicated a lamp and matches on the table.

"Light that and no tricks. Understand?"

With numb fingers he did as he was bid, while a groan came from the floor. The cabin became illuminated and for the first time Domert's face



was visible. The man had changed. His mouth twitched, across his cheek bones the skin was drawn tight, giving it a mask-like effect, with the bones standing up like whitened lumps, and behind the mask his eyes were shining pits, furtive and restless.

At sight of those eyes Wilding's pulse faltered. He was prisoner to a madman.

## CHAPTER XV

A FEW miles away Paula stretched thankfully on a bed-frame of poles, cushioned with the small springy branches of cedar, fragrant with forest incense, and watched Rachel cooking supper. The hunting lodge was as warm and comfortable as the home in Aklavik, and Paula observed that everything had its place. Good housekeeping, she reflected.

Outside the dogs were curled in the snow, having been fed, which was Rachel's first duty on arrival, with dried fish and hot tallow mixed with cornmeal. This she poured out, a small pool for each of her team. Now with bellies warm and noses thrust under bushy tails they were but quietly heaving yellow mounds a few steps from the door, with an occasional black-tipped ear twitching when some sound filtered through the encircling silence.

For Paula all this was a new, exciting experience, and by herself she never could have reached the cabin. Her thighs ached, her shins throbbed, her insteps were in rebellion against unending drag of wide-webbed shoes, but she had struggled on till there was nothing more to give, then Rachel, who had been watching closely, put her on the lurching toboggan, which, save for her was lightly laden, and the rest of the journey safely accomplished.

Now the visitor was sore but serene. A new taste had come into life.

Here in this forest habitation it struck her that Rachel was in a way transformed: she seemed quietly happy, in no hurry, and her face had so lost its former strange and rather haunted look that it was hard to imagine that it had ever been there. Sometimes she smiled a little.

"Well, Paula, feeling better?"

"Yes, much, but a bit stiff."

"That'll last for a day or two only. What do you think of all this?"

"I like it, it's almost better than Aklavik. Rachel, I was nearly finished when I got on to that toboggan."

"Not really—if there had been no toboggan you'd have gone on. It's always like that."

"Like what?"

"There are lots of things one never could do unless one had to—lots of them."

"Perhaps that's what was the matter with me," said Paula reflectively. "I'm just beginning to see it now. I've been spoiled all my life."

"I'd like to be spoilt for a while. How does it feel?"

"Rachel."

"What?"

"You make me feel unspeakably selfish."

"I don't think you're selfish, really," murmured the other girl thoughtfully.

"That's nice of you, but I know better now."

If anyone, three months previously, had told Paula Deming that presently in a shack within the Arctic Circle she would be admitting her own shortcomings to a quarter-breed girl whose guest she was, that Miss Deming had been vastly amused: but here was the fact, and its significance impressed her. If Rachel had changed within the last two days, she herself must have altered still more, and never before in her life had she been so ready to analyse her own character and composition. Was it the smell of the cedar, or coffee, or the divine languor that began to spread through her body, or what? But there was one subject she had avoided for the last two days.

"I suppose Jack is back in Aklavik," she hazarded.

"I hope so. The weather wasn't good the last time he went over."

"I didn't hear him a second time."

"You were asleep."

"Did you go out?"

"No, he was too far off, I just heard him."

"If he couldn't get back, what would he do?"

"Land somewhere and sleep in the plane."

"Oh!" Paula in this comfort and warmth did not like that idea, and said so, but to Rachel it seemed quite ordinary.

"When you know what to do, and how to take care of yourself, there's nothing in it. Don't worry, they'll be all right."

"Rachel," she murmured drowsily, "I want to ask you something."

"Yes?"

"That night in Aklavik you said that at first you didn't like me, but now you do. Why? Am I different? And if so, in what way? I rather want to know."

"Perhaps I'm the one who's different, Paula. When I first asked you to stay with me, it was because I was afraid of you—now I'm not afraid any more. My people"—those two words had a curious inflection—"when they want to learn about someone, go to that person and stay as close as they can, not asking questions, but just watching. Presently they know. It was like that with you."

"On account of Jack?"

"Yes, on account of Jack."

"He never made love to me or I to him."

"I know that," said Rachel gently.

"How can you?"

"I can't explain, I just know. He didn't make love to me, either," she added quietly. "When I gave him that parka he said that he loved me—yes—but he had to, because I said it first. I didn't understand things then, and it was just my heart that spoke. But if I had been all white like you, I wouldn't have said it. I can see that now. And I cannot love a man just because he wants me, that is why I will never marry Louis. I couldn't be fair and give him what he wants. There is no reason we should not talk freely out here where I am more myself than anywhere else. That is why I wanted you to come."

This pathetic frankness produced its effect, and Paula found it hard to reply. As for Wilding, she had fought against loving the man and discovered she could not help it. Her uncertainty must have been apparent, for presently Rachel continued:

"I wanted to tell you more about myself—you have never asked and I know why. My grandmother was a Louchoux Indian, whose family lived on the Peel River not far from here. She married a white man who left her and tried to get into the Klondyke by that route many years ago. He did not get in, and she never heard of him again. My mother, a half-breed, married a trader on the Mackenzie river above Fort Norman: he was English but had a French name: they both died when I was twelve years old, so I had to take care of myself—you don't know how much care." At this point she hesitated. "Does it interest you?"

"Yes, Rachel, oh yes, please go on."

"Well, as I grew older I tried more and more to live like a white woman, and in some ways I have done this. It was in my nature to go trapping in the winter, so I did that also. For the last three years I have taken my furs to Edmonton to sell, and made money, and there I've dressed like any other woman and did what they did, I even went to Calgary for the Stampede, but always, always I felt that I was not really white, and that other people saw that, and something inside me told me I was a fool to try so hard. Outside I managed to

look happy, but inside was different because I was only bluffing. You see, I had no women friends there; always there were men, too many men, and I hated the way they looked at me."

This to the accompaniment of bubbling coffee and sizzling bacon, while she spread out thoughts so long-locked in silence, and sent quick little side-long glances as though to make sure she was not saying too much. Never before had she spoken in such fashion to anyone, and it was plain to Paula that it helped at a time when she most needed help. The effect on the other girl was profound.

"Rachel, I think you're the bravest girl I've ever heard of, but you mustn't be sad. You've so much in front of you. You're a marvel, and with no help from anyone. That's what strikes me most."

"So much in front of me—you really feel that."

"Of course I do. Why not?"

"Then I will tell you what is in front. I've tried always to be proud of my Indian blood, but I cannot. Now I fear it. I've seen too many other women like myself but much older, also breeds, who wanted the same thing when they were young, and after a while the Indian blood became too strong and came on top of the other, and they got careless and lazy and perhaps dirty, and would sit in the sun all day doing nothing till after a few years they were all Indian again, and did not want to live like a white woman any more."

"But never in the world will you be like that," expostulated Paula.

"I think not just like that, but here, now, while we are together, my native blood is talking to me very loud and I must listen. I hear what is going outside, though you cannot. On the other side, there are a thousand things you know—you've always known—without being taught because your mother and grandmother knew them before you; they are in your blood. Well, sometimes I have seen you looking at me and wondering, for you couldn't see inside me. But now I think you understand more about Rachel Bedell. Supper is ready. To-morrow I will show you my trap lines."

She motioned to the table, and for the rest of that evening said nothing more of herself, but when, soon afterwards, Paula pulled the blankets up to her chin, her mind was charged with kaleidoscopic impressions that displaced each other like little pictures on a screen.

So short a time since she first arrived in McMurray and how much had happened since. These weeks, so unlike anything one could have foreseen, had changed her also: she knew that her understanding was enlarged, her sympathy deepened, and felt in herself the birth of new emotions, new desires and possibilities, while for Rachel she now had a strange, compelling admiration. Soon she would be flying south again with the man she confessed she loved and knew she must marry.

This reflection capped all else, and she fell asleep smiling.



Wilding sat on the floor beside Booster, who was now conscious but in great pain: the heavy calibre bullet had shattered his right shoulder joint which bled deeply, and every breath brought agony. Opposite stood Domert; the man's expression was wild but exceedingly wary; his eyes, seeming periodically to enlarge then shrink, were fixed on the two with a look of crazy triumph. From time to time a little tremor ran through his body.

"I want to talk to you, young fellow."

Wilding said nothing: he was too anxious, cursing himself for his own carelessness, and thinking about the rifle strapped up in the Junker fuselage. They had not troubled to bring it: but under the circumstances, who would have brought it? So far as any of them knew Domert was nearing the Alaska Boundary.

"He's all right, wouldn't have been hurt if he hadn't asked for it." The voice sounded harsh, cracked, it varied in pitch: the revolver was in his hand and it trembled a little. Wilding, trying desperately to find some way out of this, thought best to temporise.

"How did you get here?"

"Ha! Easy enough. I took a walk, quite a long one, understand, then came back. I know what you're thinking. They're on my trail, eh? And pretty soon they'll turn up. That's what you're waiting for, that's why you're so damned peaceful."

"Well, aren't they?" Wilding sounded like a stupid child.

"But suppose there isn't any trail?" Here Domert wagged his head and looked exultantly shrewd. "Do you suppose that? Suppose I struck an open creek, twenty miles west of here and followed it down to the Barrier then doubled back on the glare ice. What would you say to that, eh?"

"Damned clever," admitted the young man, "but this chap is going to pass out."

"Forget it. Clever, you said! You bet it was. Then I heard you, by God, I saw you, and said to myself, 'I want that plane in my business.' I didn't know how to fix it, but that blizzard drove you down. Then I knew. You're going to fly me out of this. Now do you understand?"

Domert was regarding him with a sort of crazy satisfaction: he was pleased with himself, fatuously pleased, with something almost infantile in his expression and at the same time a lightning readiness to shoot that could not be mistaken. He was not raving, but only half-mad, and thereby the more dangerous. He could not be flattered, he must know that there would be but one inevitable end to all this, unless some miracle happened, and with the genius of insanity grasped at the miracle. Fear of death had him in its clutches, yet with the strange contradictory obstinacy of the criminal he had returned to the scene of his crime and dipped his

hand in further blood. Wilding perceived that his own life hung by a hair.

"It needs a bit of thinking over," he said evenly, measuring the man, gauging his agility, his strength: it was too plain that these had been intensified by a disordered brain. In one second he might be peaceful, in the next homicidal.

"No thinking at all," barked Domert, "we take the air as soon as it's light."

It was on the tip of Wilding's tongue to argue that he was nearly out of fuel and any sustained flight impossible, but he checked himself just in time. His brain had begun to race; it flickered with alternatives. He might take this man up, and if he could find the pursuit party crash beside them, in which case and without doubt a bullet would be in his brain before the Junker stood on her shattered nose. Tail spin? No saying how that would end. He pictured himself at the controls with Domert standing on the wing twisting the starting crank, but Domert would be too sharp for that. He stared at Booster. Booster's eyes were wide open; he had heard and understood everything, but lay helpless, suffering as much from that as from the torture in his shoulder.

"Well, all right, but I've got to fix this chap up. Nothing against him, have you?"

Domert, shaking his head, watched with a sort of furtive fascination while Wilding cut away the soaked clothing, exposing the wound. The heavy

bullet had gone clean through, carrying shreds of fabric and splintered bone in its passage, and it was evident that the ragged hole, unless it soon had skilled treatment, would cause blood-poisoning. But Burstall and his Aklavik Hospital might have been a thousand miles away.

"Water, hot water," he begged.

Domert, revolver still ready, put the kettle beside him, when he did what he could, and then under the same mad surveillance, made tea, which Booster, wincing as he raised his head, managed to swallow. Not daring to move him, Wilding put a blanket over him where he lay. While thus busy he ceased to think about anything else, but now that no more could be done, his fears rushed back.

"Look here, Domert," he said desperately, "this man will die if he isn't properly looked after. You say you've nothing against him. All right. Now I've got two months pay, that's six hundred dollars in the plane. Also I've got two thousand in the bank. I've worked for it. I'll give you the six and send the rest anywhere you say—you have my word on that—on one condition."

"What's that?"

"You help me get him into the plane as soon as it's light. I'll take him to Aklavik. When I get there I'll report—understand I'll have to report something—that you've gone off in a certain direction, but it won't be the one you have taken. Is that clear? I'm offering you all I've got, and making

myself a damned official liar to save this man's life, and," he added, "I'll have enough engine trouble to keep me in Aklavik for twenty-four hours. I can't do any more than that."

"And if I don't?"

"By God, they'll get you and swing you—if you live to be swung," blazed Wilding, losing control. "Three patrols are out for you on this side, and more across the Boundary. You may dodge 'em for a while, but in the end you've as much chance as a snowball in hell."

"Put some wood on that stove," ordered the other man harshly, "I'm cold. Shut the damper—that's better. Now I'll tell you something. Maybe you know it already. My name is Prado, and I've all the money I want. I don't want yours. There's a thousand for you when you land me in Alaska. I've made a few mistakes in my life, but not many. One was in Aklavik when I flashed that big note on Louis. Drunk, I guess. Well, I had to cover that up, and burned Louis' store. Tell him when you see him. The other was when I fell for that breed girl Rachel. She got me all right. There's a lot more, but that's enough about me. You know who you're dealing with. Plug up the hole in your friend as best you can, drop me over in Alaska and forget the rest. It would make a good story, wouldn't it?"

Wilding, cornered, ransacked his brain to no purpose. It was empty. Booster, he felt, would

not have long to live with his wound uncleansed. He thought of the rifle in the rack in the moored Junker three hundred yards away. What fools they'd been. He thought of the two in Rachel's cabin, so nearby, but no breath of that must escape him here. His imagination darting in all directions was arrested by impossibilities, and in the end there seemed but one phantom chance. There was no opening for escape now. Prado, of course it was Prado, sat too alert, his weapon too ready, but perhaps in the morning on the way to the plane he could just for an instant create some diversion and come to grips. His heart beat strongly at the thought.

"Yes, a good story. Maybe I'll try to write it some day."

At this the outlaw looked foolishly pleased, and while one part of his warped intelligence remained on strict guard, another seized on this idea, and, welcoming the possibility of appearing in print, began to talk of his past life, telling how he had been a train despatcher and telegrapher, had forged an official cheque, then gone to the Yukon and robbed a bank, having previously, through a confederate, arranged the apparent alibi that misled Corporal Jenks in the wedge tent in Aklavik. He seemed to like picturing himself in this chronology, to take pleasure in his own lawlessness. It was a story of action, prompt and ruthless all through. Told in this fashion across the insensible body of the air mechanic, to the accompaniment of the

mumbling fire and wind in the stovepipe, with his now strangely inhuman face illuminated in the yellow light of the smoky lamp, with the gleaming weapon whose muzzle never drooped in his hand, it made an impression not easily obliterated.

The night dragged out, the wind dropped, the sky cleared and innumerable stars occupied the heavens. From time to time Prado motioned to the stove which Wilding automatically replenished. At eight in the morning while it was still very dark, he cut bread, cooked bacon and boiled tea, exchanging revolver for knife so that he was still armed. Assuming that Wilding had surrendered and would be compliant, he pushed food across the table in the manner of an attentive host, explaining that an empty belly was poor foundation for a flight to Alaska. But not for one second was he off guard, and by now Wilding had decided that to attempt revolt and get shot in the process was poor business. In that case, both Booster and himself would certainly die, and die alone.

It was strange that in this issue, his thoughts turned most often to Rachel: of the two she apparently stood out the more distinctly. He seemed to know her better, and if word could be got to her of this situation, she could certainly solve it. He could picture her, under cover, rifle balanced, waiting for Prado to step outside the door: she would need nothing more, while Paula in such a case would be helpless, and the pursuit patrols were, he reckoned,

forty miles to the westward. It had been clever of Prado to wade down that open creek to the glare ice, and how did he keep his feet from freezing?

"That torch business you put under the engine," said the outlaw, "how long will the oil last?"

"Till say ten o'clock."

"And then?"

"When it goes out the engine will freeze."

"It won't freeze, we'll get away by then."

This at least was something to go on, and Wilding's brain became busy; finally he decided to risk a dash somewhere between cabin and plane. If he could reach the machine and his rifle, he feared nothing more.

"Is that fellow going to die?" Prado's glance roved to Booster.

"He will in a few hours if I don't get him out of this."

"How long to Alaska from here?"

"Perhaps an hour, depends on the weather."

"At that rate you ought to get back and have him in Aklavik by noon."

"Does that part of it interest you?"

"One dead man is enough to dream about," remarked Prado, coolly.

Wilding did not comment on that. It seemed better that this outlaw should know nothing of Britten's recovery, nothing of the means by which he reached Aklavik, and especially nothing of the



fact that the two women were but three miles away: so the moments dragged on while the outlaw began preparations for flight.

They were deliberate. Snow-shoes and rifle, he would need those; money—there was no concealment about the roll of bills that had lately seen the light in Louis' store; food, matches, and a short axe in his packsack—all important. Then he picked up the dead marten, stroked its silky fur, and looked at Wilding with a strange expression.

"You know," he said, "it's queer how things come round. I really wanted that girl and didn't intend to hurt her. That's what brought me out here. I told her I'd marry her any day, which is going a long way for a white man. Then I came across this damned marten in one of her traps and got interested—you see, I've never done any trapping myself—so I lifted it. Well, that started things, that bit of fur, and she came after me: I kind of thought she would. When she got here she couldn't get away—I'd reckoned on that—anyway, you'll hear about it later." At this, he lifted his head with a jerk. "She pulled Britten's body into Aklavik, didn't she?"

Wilding nodded.

"Pretty good stuff, I'll say. Well, she's just as much a virgin now as she was before, however much that is. When you get back, tell her I've no fault to find with that part of it—she stood me off all right."

He went on like this for some time, telling Wilding things he already knew, seemingly loath to pass the time in silence, licking his lips, shooting quick, furtive glances that betrayed a rising excitement, examining again the things in his packsack, and staring at times round the cabin as though to register some fixed impression of this place that he would never see again. Finally, when the outer darkness faded into day he stood up.

"Come on, Pilot—you walk ahead with the oil-cans, and no tricks."

Wilding bent over Booster, saw that the man was either unconscious or asleep, felt the slack hand, and was heartened to find it warm. Then he pulled on Rachel's parka and stepped out. The air was clear, promising fine weather, and before him lay the tramped trail that led through the belt of cottonwoods. Now he began swinging the can in his right hand, testing its weight against his strength, for he had decided that the attempt must be made before reaching the plane, and his only chance was to stun Prado by using the can as a projectile, then jump on him before he recovered. With this in mind he shortened his steps, slowing his pace, breathing deeply, listening to Prado close behind, and wondering how close the muzzle of the outlaw's revolver was to the small of his own back. Ten yards from the fringe of cottonwood he rested his burden on the snow, was aware that Prado also halted, then whirled round and swung the right

can at the man's head. He was but ten feet away.

It was quick, but not quite quick enough: Prado ducked, his arm shot up, Wilding saw rather than heard the revolver bark and felt a stinging pain in his side. Then a shock, and he smelt powder. The belt of timber began to darken, and he shut his eyes with a sudden sickening realisation that he had failed. He had failed! He seemed to be falling, falling, pitching head over heels into a gulf that had no dimensions and was very dark. As he fell the revolver spoke again and was answered by another shot, a louder, stronger shot. After that everything faded out.

When he opened his eyes he looked at two faces that were bent over him: at first he could recognise neither, but presently decided that they belonged to Paula and Rachel, which, being obviously absurd, puzzled him very much, especially because they were just faces without any bodies, till slowly the bodies took form and substance, and he heard a voice which was certainly Rachel's.

"All right now, Jack, don't move; don't worry, it's all right."

He didn't move, but lay there while partial consciousness returned, watching what went on with a curious detachment. Paula, Rachel, and Paula's team! He saw that much. Also that Rachel, leaving Paula kneeling on the snow beside him, got up and stood for a moment looking at Prado who was face

down, lying straight out, the revolver still in his right hand. That was all he could see of Prado, and it seemed enough. Paula was crying, and trying to tell him something with the tears running down her face, but he couldn't make out what she said, and when she pressed his hand hard he felt glad. The world was still gyrating in dizzy circles.

Then Rachel! It seemed to his dazed senses that she moved unsteadily on her feet, biting her lip, looking unlike the old quiet, self-possessed person he knew so well. With Paula's help she slid him on to the toboggan, and, not even looking back at Prado, drew him through the cottonwoods, easing the toboggan down the steep bank so that there was no jolt on reaching the ice. Now he saw the plane still moored as he had left it, two inches of snow on her metal wings, and a warm vapour rising from the shrouded cowl, showing that the oil heater was still in action. Helpless though he lay, this reunion with his own craft filled him with a sudden satisfaction. Then Rachel again:

"Jack, listen! Do you understand me?"

"Yes, perfectly. I'll be myself soon, then we'll get off. What about Booster?"

"You'll be all right, but not so soon—you've lost a lot of blood. All you need to know is that Prado got you, and I got him. We needn't trouble about him any more, and details later. I've seen Booster—I'm going after him now with the dogs. For God's

sake you lie still and do as you're told. Paula's going to fly us back.

"Paula!"

"Why not?" interrupted that young woman briskly. "It'll be—be your fault if we don't get there."

"Good Lord!" he said faintly, and shut his eyes, nor did he see anything of what transpired during the next half hour on Barrier River: how Rachel came back with Booster emitting weak curses on the toboggan, but as helpless as his chief: how it was Booster who, flat on his back—for Rachel would not let him stir—showed the two girls how to clear the plane's wings of snow by dragging a rope over them from end to end: how he warned them to close the drain plug before pouring back the warm engine oil: how Rachel slaved over the starter crank now stiffened by hours of frost, with Paula ready to switch on ignition when compression had been sufficiently built up.

Rachel toiled over this, feeling herself sick and dizzy, with a trickle of blood at the corners of her lips. When the propeller, after its first savage roar of rotation, was slowed down, and the engine ticked over to warm up as evenly as well-adjusted clock-work, she stood on the wing for a few moments before climbing down as though in doubt how to tackle the rest of the business. Wilding learned next day that the only way they could get him into the fuselage was to stand the toboggan up on end,

then draw him inside by main strength, and they would have failed in that had not Booster, defying his wound and bleeding heavily in the process, given the help of his one good arm.

But he did know that a few moments later Rachel was beside him when the plane began to move: his pilot's brain also told him that Booster was in the cockpit coaching Paula, who had the stick, coaching her about the take-off run necessary to clear the low, lightly timbered point. He heard the deepened roar of the Pratt-Whitney, felt speed increasing, felt the little lift as the plane left the ice and was completely air borne—then the suave, smooth, familiar motion that meant so much.

Thirty minutes to make Aklavik! Halfway there the fog in his brain dissolved; he blinked as the figure of Rachel became distinct beside him; she was leaning forward, her eyes had contracted, her lips were tight; she looked stiff, strained, unnatural, and though she was staring down at him, it seemed that her gaze had been arrested and saw something invisible to him in mid-air, that it was concentrated on some half-way point and did not reach him. This impression deepened, he thought he had never seen anyone look quite so sad, till of a sudden that passed and she smiled at him in her old spontaneous fashion.

“Feeling better, Jack?”

“Yes, but I'm a bit lost. How did you get here?”

“I'll tell you to-morrow. Paula flies well, doesn't

she? Ten minutes more and we're in Aklavik. I'm so glad, Jack, so glad."

That was all he could get from her, while under his left arm-pit something burned like a hot coal, but he was very thankful for her presence, especially when she took his hand, holding it between both of hers. Presently, leaning closer, she put her cheek against his, where it felt smooth and warm, while he could hear her talking to herself, certainly not to him, in some tongue that he did not know. It sounded like Louchoux. He was drowsy when she did this, but still conscious of the steady beat of the engine, which came in a deep welcome note with the assurance that all was well in the air and that whoever was doing the flying knew their job and kept the machine level.

Then he was aware that the engine had cut out, that the plane banked a little with just a touch of side slip, so that what remained of his consciousness moved forwards into the cockpit, and with it he pictured Paula, her mouth screwed up as it always did just before she made a landing, a little wrinkle bordering her nose, looking terribly serious and concentrated. After that he heard the singing of wind, and felt the landing, practically a three-point effort with no jar at all. The last thing he knew in that moment was fancying himself as a damned good instructor.

When he woke up it was in the hospital with a lot of blankets over him, in spite of which he felt queer and strangely cold. A thermometer was in

his mouth, Burstall holding one end between finger and thumb, his watch in the other hand. Beside Burstall stood Paula, biting her lip and looking absurdly grave, an expression so unlike her usual one that he grinned at her, while his brain, which didn't seem to be working very well, tried to reconstruct recent happenings as they came in a medley.

"Hullo, Pilot," he mumbled.

His voice sounded odd on account of the thermometer, but she brightened at once, and looked at him in a way that he did not recognise, gentle, wistful, hopeful.

"Better, Jack?"

"I will be soon, but I should like to work things out."

Burstall shook his head. "Time enough later, everything's okay. Let it go at that." He took out the thermometer, glanced at it, and put it back into his case. "Your job is to stay put and let others do the thinking—I'll see you presently."

Wilding with an effort concentrated on something he wanted to know very much, in fact he must know it, something he had been dreaming about, but what the devil was it?

"Prado," he jerked out. "What happened? I threw an oil can at him, then I heard shooting. What came next?"

"He hit you and was—was killed himself," said Paula in a low voice. "That is all over, all done with. Don't go back to it."



"Who killed him?"

"Rachel." It came in a whisper.

"What— was — Rachel — doing — there?" He got this out with difficulty. Paula appeared to be moving away from him, and he feared she'd miss it.

"It's a long story, Jack. I'll tell you next time."

"I—I want to see her."

"We can't disturb her, dear, she's—she's resting."

Again his mind was swimming. Rachel had killed Prada and was resting—Paula had called him "dear"—he was in hospital—but Booster, what about Booster? At this point consciousness fled, and he wandered back into the maze from which for a few moments he had emerged, while Paula leant over him, her eyes wet.

"Don't die, Jack, don't die. Don't leave me. I want you so much."

If he heard that he did not understand, he was up in the air grasping the stick, talking to Booster. Dabbing her face, she went into the passage where she found Burstall talking with the matron.

"The symptoms," he said, "indicate septicæmia: there is the characteristic rigor and delirium, and I don't like it: some infection in the blood stream. I wish he had bled more freely."

"I was afraid of that, Doctor; what can we do?"

"Do!" he shook his head dubiously. "What we need is a streptococcal serum, and"—here he stared out at the frozen stretches of the delta—"there isn't one chance in a thousand of getting it here in time."

## CHAPTER XVI

THREE hours later, and sixteen hundred miles away, Scott was leaning over Sturt's desk at the Mackenzie base, his eyes like bits of hot steel, his voice cold with resolution, while Sturt regarded him with a sensation usually foreign to his own cool deliberate personality. Between them lay a slip on which was typed a message from the signal station.

"Agent Airways McMurray. Reference final communication from Burstall serum desired at Aklavik available here. Can you provide air facilities immediately? Answer. Burrow M.O. Fort Smith."

This significant communication was burning in Scott's brain, it throbbed in his blood, and its potency banished the consciousness of all else. For three days now, defying his officer's orders, he had haunted Sturt's office, following every detail of the drama being enacted on the lower Mackenzie. Like all the rest of the men of the north who knew that distant region, he too lived what the inhabitants of Aklavik were living. Whitson picked up the news as it came in, from swaying filaments of scattered wireless stations he gathered it, and brown-faced men clustered round the key desk with growing excitement. Isolated trappers caught the Aklavik local broadcast on aerials swung above the snow-laden roofs of their winter shacks: black-bearded Oblates in rusty

soutanes, with the sacred beads round their strong necks, got it after Mass: Hudson's Bay Post Managers and their wives heard it when the store closed for the night, while Louchoux, Yellowknives and Rabbit-skin Indians halted to talk about it when their trails met. Amongst them all Scott had received this with the most vivid yet controlled emotion, but now he could contain himself no longer.

"Look here, Sturt, I——"

"You're no more fit than you were a month ago," said Sturt roughly.

"I'm fit for this."

Sturt shook his head: he was in hard straits, with no other pilot at the base. The fleet had been reduced by three machines now off in the Ile Lacrosse country, chartered to carry diamond drill equipment and drilling experts into a recently discovered gold prospect. To recall one of these involved a time element that from all he could learn would have fatal results. Now, while he spoke, Wilding lay raving five hundred frozen leagues away. Was he justified in risking the life of one noted pilot on the chance—it was no more than a chance—of saving that of another.

Better than most of that close knit circle he knew the bond existing between these two: he had not forgotten the affair at Whaleback Island; he knew that these two loved each other in the wordless manner that passes the love of women, the kind of love that produces instant decisions without any

thought of self; he knew that Wilding had modelled himself after this man with the steel grey eyes who sat staring at him with such a steady, unwinking gaze.

Suddenly Scott reached for a paper, wrote something, and pushed it over. "That's the alternative," said he, grimly.

Sturt frowned at it. "You don't mean it?"

"I'm not in the habit of signing statements I don't mean."

His resignation from the Company! Sturt, gulping, pictured the consequence. The Company's chief pilot, whose record has been woven into the story of the opening of the North—pioneer and Dean of them all—the man who always came through, who knew that northern immensity as did no other, and carried it all in a prehensile unforgetting brain. That this man should resign because refused permission to succour a brother pilot was unthinkable. The public wouldn't stand for it. So decided Sturt, thus forced into a corner, though not at once did he yield, but scrutinised Scott's face with a hard, relentless stare. He did, somehow, look better and stronger; from somewhere he had gathered a little strength, and this brought assurance, while on top of it was the growing conviction that Scott would crack, go to pieces and never be quite the same again were Wilding to die while he himself sat stewing in his bungalow.

"Fair enough, Jim. You go."

Scott only nodded, then went home, where he

found Mary. One glance at him told her everything, struck her dumb. She put her hands to her heart, pressing hard. At first she said nothing, nor did he seem to expect this, while she went about getting his flying kit ready, collecting things, lingering over them, divided between pride in her man and the sudden sharp ache in her breast. When all was ready, the two stood over James Scott junior who was fingering a tiny model plane, a pigmy Junker that Roberts had carved for him, its wings and fuselage silvered with luminous paint.

"How long this time, Jim?" she asked gently.

Not long, it's good going, no Whaleback Island in it."

She only nodded, trying to fortify herself with the thought that this man of hers knew better than anyone could tell him just what lay in front. Summer and winter, he knew every loop twist and fold in the Mackenzie—knew how to save his reserves in the air—was unexcitable—had judgment, and—this was the comforting part of it—something assured her that he would not call on body and nerve for this test were he not confident of pulling through.

"My love to him and Paula," she said, bravely. "Tell Paula she's graduated, she's one of us now, and"—she hesitated—"about Rachel——"

"You'll hear when I get back."

"A week, Jim, it'll be about a week?" said she.

"More like two, I think. See what you can do to console Sturt for backing down—he doesn't like

himself a bit. Good luck, dear one, take care of yourself."

Take care of herself! She choked a little over that, but only nodded, then hooked her arm into his and they went down the bush road to where the Junker's propeller was already weaving a stately silver circle in the stinging air and Roberts also in Arctic garb, stood by with Sturt.

"I am sending what mail there is," said the agent, "the more welcome since they don't expect it. Got all you want?"

Scott nodded.

"Burrow will be on the look out for you with that serum."

"Right!" He glanced along the backwater, now a bush-bordered lane of dazzling white. "Weather report?"

"Good as far down as Fort Simpson. Good luck!"

"All right with you, Roberts?"

"All set, sir."

Scott kissed his wife, whispering something where-at she clung to him for just a second, then swung himself into the cockpit. Once there he did not look back, but advanced the throttle, and behind the plane as she slid forward there was a sudden blast of flying snow: the tilted noses of the skis, which were but a fraction in weight of the discarded pontoons, seemed to rise eagerly on their crystalline pathway, and in ten seconds the plane was air borne.

Now they were over the left hand bend of the Athabasca and McMurray, when between high banks they turned towards Chipewyan: from the air the river looked like a flat-bottomed ravine, the walls of which bristled with spindling tops of naked trees. To northward the terrain gradually smoothed out into an endless white carpet on which lay, as though stranded, islet and island of timber. There was no wind, and but little cloud.

"Pretty good for night flying," said Scott, talking at the back of the engineer's ear.

Roberts gave a nod: he was glad to be on this trip, and looked forward to getting a lot of details at Aklavik about the last days of the man whom he himself had been the first to suspect was Prada. That would always be a satisfaction. As for the reward, one could not be at all sure, for Prada's death was not due to any contributed information: Jenks had been too easy there, and left the outlaw to do his own identification. These reflections conduced to silence.

An hour later he glanced sideways at his chief and suddenly felt disturbed. Scott's face looked pinched, his eyes dull. They had lost the dominant fire that Sturt saw in them, and now reflected strain, while his body, clad though it was, lacked its old suggestion of massive imperturbable strength, and the parka hung loosely. The first fine flame of decision had passed; he was wondering how much strength he had in reserve.

At Fort Smith they found Burrow on the landing ground recently cleared in the bush close by, because at that point the river ice on the big eddy below the cascades was always treacherous. *The Distributor* had been hauled up from that eddy on skids, and lay there an ungainly hulk out of her element, apparently clawing at the sixty foot bank, with her cabin windows boarded up and ridges of snow piled on the floats of her great stern wheel. She looked so stiff and dead that it was hard to imagine her ever thrashing down the Mackenzie stuffed with her vital burden of supplies and lusty humanity.

Burrow came up as the propeller ceased to revolve, a small packet in his hand.

"I've been talking to Burstall again, and from what he tells me there is no doubt about septicæmia. 'This ought to help if'—here his tone altered—"if it's in time."

"How much time have I got? Three days?"

Burrow shook his head. "I think not—not that much. Once the blood stream is contaminated the infection develops very fast. Mrs. Masters—you remember Jack flew her up from Resolution three months ago?"

"Yes."

"He did it just in time—twenty-four hours later—well—I have my doubts."

"That's what I wanted to know," said Scott, briefly. "Okay, Roberts?"

"All set, sir."



They took off in a flurry, with the Pratt-Whitney wide open, her valves in a vicious chatter. Nearing the delta of the Slave where it debouches into the shallows of Great Slave Lake, they cut across north westwards, not stopping at Resolution, but holding straight for the Mackenzie. Robert's brows went up a little, but he said nothing.

Unknowingly he was embarked on a flight that would shine bright in the annals of Northern pilots. Scott, sitting motionless, had transformed himself into a sort of detached consciousness; he was aware of his body, but now regarded it merely as a means to an objective, and in this mental condition he divorced his brain from his body, set himself to speak over that body and directed it from the throne of a great decision. He might be weak and weary but he did not know it.

Hours passed, night had come, and they flew on under an intimate company of stars, while far beneath the ghostly earth slid by in a panorama that seemed always the same yet constantly varied. It was cold up here, Roberts put it at forty below, but the man at the stick felt no cold, he was too occupied in anticipating and forgetting, anticipating well-known river curves, lakes and landmarks, trading posts and settlements that successively swept towards him from the northern horizon, forgetting them, and pitching his brain beyond so soon as they appeared. He was aware of the man with the stick in his hand, a sort of other and subordinate self who performed

automatically the function of directing flight, but that was all. He had achieved a spiritual exaltation.

The night drew on while the plane droned indomitably through a kingdom of darkness. At Fort Simpson and Norman mail was dropped, and the tanks refilled by men with lanterns who waited his arrival, for word had been flashed down the Mackenzie, and all along that great gelid avenue the thoughts and hopes of the north were with him.

At Arctic Red, where there was no wireless station, Roberts did the fuelling with the aid of an independent trader, while Scott, conserving every ounce of his endurance, sat in the cockpit, his face like a mask, his imagination beside Wilding in hospital at Aklavik. So far, thirteen hundred miles in fifteen hours, including stops, and the best speed of the Junker was a hundred miles an hour in still air.

At nine that morning they crossed the Arctic Circle, landing at Aklavik before noon.

The settlement had turned out to greet them: through eyes red-rimmed he saw them, with Burstall the nearest. He knew that he climbed down and gave Burstall the packet; he knew that Whitson had him by the arm and was walking him off; that Paula was there looking much older than when he saw her last, and then of a sudden that detached consciousness of his seemed to swim back into his body, and experience a great weariness. Next came a feeling of warmth, slow, steady, delicious, and a huge silence instead of the roar of the Pratt-Whitney.

Paula was in the narrow hospital passage by Wilding's door talking to Burstall.

"Doctor," she said, "isn't he strong enough to know now? He's worrying and puzzled: he feels hurt, and it's making him suspicious. I've side-stepped all I can, now I'm in a corner."

Burstall gave her an understanding nod. "I know, and you've done well. He's taken a turn, he's on the mend, and his physical condition should do the rest very soon, but I haven't felt it would be wise before this. I'd tell him in your own way, with the facts first, then gradually how the thing came about. And"—he added with a smile—"say anything else that occurs to you would—er—ease the—well—you know best."

At that she also smiled, opened Wilding's door, and saw his now dear and familiar face. He was sitting up.

"Good morning! Who said you could do that?"

"Burstall. What's the news, and how are you?"

"I'm pulling through with care. As for news, aren't we on the coast of the Beaufort Sea?"

"We are, but there's such a thing as wireless."

"Then I'll go and see Whitson at once."

"You'll do no such thing. Look here, I'm a lot better to-day, quite a different man, with complete control of my senses, and—er—emotions."

"That's nothing new," she said demurely.

"Thanks. Will you do something for me?"

"Anything I can do in reason."

"Then bring Rachel here. I want to say 'thank you,' and much more than that. My God, Paula, why are you always putting me off? Didn't she save my life and Booster's too?"

"Yes, Jack."

"Then bring her here."

"I—I can't."

"What do you mean?"

"No one can bring her ever, any more." Her voice had sunk to a whisper. "Jack, don't you understand?"

"You mean she's dead—she's——" His own voice trailed out.

"Yes, I mean just that. It's been so hard to keep it from you, but I had to till now. Dr. Burstall said so."

Wilding, crumpling the sheet between his fingers, looked at her strangely. "When?" he groaned.

"A few hours after we got here. She looked queer, and said nothing till you and Booster were safe in bed, and that took a little while, because there was a good deal to do for you both. She just sat in a chair not speaking at all, and if anyone spoke to her she just shook her head. Later she asked that her dogs be fed, and after that nothing more."

"How long was she there like that?"

"I think about two hours, but none of us had any thought of time. When Dr. Burstall got round to

her, she kept on shaking her head, and coughed, and, Jack, in a few seconds she was dead—from internal bleeding.”

“My God!” gasped Wilding. “What caused that?”

“Prado’s bullet hit her when he fired back, and she said nothing of it to anyone. She knew, she must have known, but was so determined to get you and Booster to hospital that she kept it to herself.”

Wilding could not answer, too much in his heart and brain, too many pictures of the past crowding back to him to be clad in words. It was all incredible. Here, gazing at the girl whom he knew he loved, he was enveloped in the spirit of another woman who had loved him even unto death. No, there were no words.

“I can only guess at what you must be feeling,” went on Paula with gentle sympathy. “Shall I tell you the rest, all of it, now?”

He nodded.

“That night, the one she and I spent in the hunting cabin, she talked about herself as never before, at any rate, to me; and for the first time I began really to understand her. It was all honest and pathetic, and in a way, hopeless. She had tried so hard to do what she called ‘act white,’ and knew she’d failed. There wasn’t anything I could say, for if I hadn’t been candid she’d have seen through it at once. Can you imagine that?”

"Yes, I think so." He was calmer now, his face very grave.

"She'd been so kind and thoughtful and patient, Jack, and considerate about my stupidity in the woods, and she knew that you didn't really love her."

"She knew that?"

"Oh yes, she was quite convinced, and accepted it, and when I went to bed—her bed again—I loved her in return, though she made me feel rather small. I must have gone to sleep at once, and don't remember anything more till I woke up with her standing beside me. Her hand was on my shoulder, and the lamp lit. It was six o'clock."

"Six o'clock?"

"Yes, and Rachel said we must eat and start. I asked where and why at that hour, and she said it was part of her dream, the one she told us about weeks ago, but wouldn't explain. She had to do what the dream said. She looked so strange, though quite calm, and I couldn't read her face at all, and had nothing to say. Well, we ate, she harnessed the dogs, and we started off. It was hard work, and I felt cold, and it was dark in the woods. She followed some old tracks that she said were hers, but they had drifted up. She had the rifle, and went ahead breaking trail, and kept very quiet. She kept the dogs quiet too. It wasn't any use my asking questions, because I saw they wouldn't be answered. At one point at the edge of the bush she halted,

and I saw a shack not far off. There was a light inside, and——”

“And three men, two of them in a fix,” interrupted Wilding, “I see now, go on.”

“Rachel warned me not to speak, so we went on till we came to a river, and I saw the plane at a distance—our plane. I didn’t know what to think. Then she pushed on, tied the dogs some distance back from the shack, made me stand where the bush was thick, told me not to move on any account, and we waited it seemed for hours. Rachel was hidden close by. Finally you came out with two big cans, another man behind you. Then Rachel got ready to shoot, so I was certain she had gone mad, and just at that moment I saw you throw one of the cans. Then—then I saw you shot, and in that moment Rachel stepped out and fired—she told me afterwards that she couldn’t shoot sooner without the chance of hitting you, and at once Prada fired back, and I heard her give a little gasp, and that was all. I didn’t realise she was hit, and—and——” She broke off shakily, her lip in a quiver.

“Yes, go on, tell me all of it.”

Paula, plucking up courage, told him.

“When Rachel was cranking the starter,” she concluded, “I thought she was biting her lips till the blood came, but now I know it wasn’t that. She was bleeding inside, and it got into her throat. Dr. Burstall told me that it was amazing she lived

as long as she did, but, Jack, she was determined not to die till you were safe in hospital, and—and—I don't think I want to say any more just now."

She buried her face beside him, shoulders heaving, till Wilding put out his hand.

"One thing you've forgotten, dear."

At this she lifted her head; a light in her eyes that he had not found there before.

"I wouldn't be here were it not for you, Pilot," he said, "don't overlook that—I won't—ever."

"It wasn't anything compared to what she did, anything at all, and you taught me."

Queer, he reflected, how things came about with these two women who loved and united to save him. One had given her life. His thoughts went back to an hour he had spent with the other near the tar sands of the Athabasca, when for some reason he did not then understand he promised to teach her to fly. And if he hadn't! He was pondering this and much else when Scott came in, looked a trifle self-conscious, and was about to retreat.

"Hold on, Jim, don't go."

"Two's company," grinned Scott.

"So is three," protested Paula.

"Whitson was in this morning giving me the details of your trip down with that serum," said Wilding.

"It was a pretty good trip," admitted the older man, "no trouble anywhere."



"But you beat the record."

"There was only yours to beat," murmured Scott placidly, "and it did me good. I needed fresh air, that's all."

"Well, the stuff you brought pulled me through, and—er—thanks, old man."

"That's all right."

"Oh, you two, you two," breathed Paula, "I think I love you both."

Wilding made a little sound in his throat. "Jim, you're married. Get out of this, will you?"

"I told you that two were company," grinned Scott, picking himself up. "Well, so long. The forecast indicates dirty weather, so I'm off in an hour back to my boss. She sent you her love, and won't expect you before she sees you. Might come south with me next time, eh?"

That forecast—it came through from Point Barrow—was correct, and Scott got away just in time to escape a blizzard that gripped the western Arctic for a week. It raged down from the Beaufort Sea, smote the Mackenzie delta, tore south-east, fell furiously on Great Bear and the Dismal Lake country, and whipped across the Barrens so viciously that the dun-coloured herds of caribou stood for days with empty bellies huddled together in shallow ravines to escape its biting grip. Fur, hide and feather sought what shelter it might, and death stalked abroad seeking those who found it not. By day no sun, by night no stars only the icy

kiss of Arctic wind and level lines of streaming snow.

Somewhere in the heart of that maelstrom moved Pituluk, the hunter. He had travelled a long way on a journey that began soon after the news of the death of Isaluk, his brother, reached Aklavik, and with him were Oomgah and Pyak, The Latecomer, his youngest son of one year old, from whom Oomgah refused to be separated. The other children he had left with friends, as was the custom of his people. Also on the sledge were the foot-drill and dental outfit, the pride of his heart.

It had been a strange journey, and not profitable as he expected, because for some reason the Huskies of the western Arctic, at least, such as he encountered, had unusually good teeth. Now and again some disgruntled hunter pushed forward a reluctant help-mate and watched in silence while Pituluk delved and probed, gripping the tortured head between strong knees, but for the most part business was poor. As for white foxes, he took hardly any, nor was there any word along that coast of a stranded whale, which, if one could be found, would end the scarcity of bait.

So all in all, the future did not look rosy, the dogs were lean, while Oomgah complained that she was not getting enough food for three, meaning by this herself, Pyak, and the unborn babe in her bosom.

Thus then the situation when Pituluk did something he had never done before, and deserting the naked coast west of Coronation Gulf, struck straight over the Barrens in search of caribou. It was here that the great blizzard caught him.

They had been travelling for two days, and eaten the last of the frozen fish, when skies grew dark and snow began to fall: the land was blotted out, the heavens had vanished, there was no sound but that steady doleful drone, and the heart of Pituluk lay heavy within him. He had been a fool!

The second night was bad, and the third worse. No food at all now, and the snow too soft for igloo building, so they put the sledge on its side, and lay in the lee with skin blankets over them, while Pyak whimpered softly with his small head pressed against Oomgah's empty breast.

In the morning Pituluk tried to kill a dog, but could not—the famished beasts were too wary. With hunger burning their own vitals they read his purpose, and circled just out of gunshot. He attempted this for an hour, and came back shaking his head.

"It is no use," he said, "they know as much as their master."

Oomgah looked at him with sunken eye. She could not comprehend how or why all this had come about, as always in the past there was food enough.

"The thing that my husband bought from the

white man to bore holes in my mouth has made him mad," she said dully, "and brought us to a country that is strange and empty. Throw it away. She had sooner that food be put in her mouth."

Pituluk, now in sore straits, shook his head: Oomgah was a woman, and such matters lay beyond her, therefore he did not blame her.

"Your husband paid three hundred dollars for this thing, and it weighs little, so he will keep it. Perhaps we shall come to a village where there is much need of a tooth doctor."

"Perhaps before that we three shall starve, having no dogs."

This, as he admitted, was reasonable enough, but not yet had he shot his last bolt.

"There is but one thing still to do. Not again can we reach the sea ice against this storm, so it is left only to go south."

"Your wife cannot walk further carrying both Pyak and the one not yet to be seen," said she.

"Then let her get on the sledge," barked the hunter, "and her husband will be many dogs at once, many and strong."

Thus in the fury of the great blizzard Pituluk called on his manhood. He did not know where he was going, only that to stay here any longer meant slow and certain death, so he wedged Oomgah tight on the sledge, to which was lashed the foot-drill, object of her scorn, looped the traces over

his stout breast, and trudged southward with the wind against his broad back.

His thoughts were varied, but he did not complain. He thought of Isaluk, whose spirit without doubt knew all that was going on, and probably journeyed close beside him; of Rachel, of Ingalls, the white man in the white apron, with shining pliers in his hands, and of his own schooner now pulled out at the head of the delta, the snow sifting through the cabin doors, and lying deep on her greasy decks. He thought of hunting and fishing, and, hair bristling a little, of those Shapes who, having the figure but twice the stature of men, walk in the north by night, and whom to meet is death.

The hours passed with no word from Oomgah, nor, so deep was the voice of the storm, could he have heard had she spoken. He pressed on, short stiff legs moving like slow-acting pistons, himself a truncated column of white, fired with loyalty and love, leaning like the tower of Pisa, a warm, living, breathing pigmy in this immensity, calling on all his fortitude, on all the reserve of strength, of blood and bone and sinew, for behind him lurched the sledge with its shapeless burden, his hostages to destiny.

He was not conscious of time—time did not exist any more—he was now a dog, many dogs, so he dared not halt, and the whip that scourged him was the lash of fortitude and courage.

Then suddenly, quite close, he heard a real dog bark, and saw a light.

It was the winter camp of Maclean, a Government meteorologist, who had travelled hither from Ottawa to make weather observations in the Barrens. Four tents with double walls and double roofs, with oil stoves and lumber floors—they were banked with snow, and the lights inside filtered through the canvas so that they showed soft and warm. The outfit had come in by air just before the freeze-up.

Pituluk struggled round to the south side where the tents would open, and saw a red-haired man at the door of one of them.

"Who are you?" the man spoke in Eskimo.

The hunter took a long breath, his strength had suddenly run out like water from a pool when the tide ebbs.

"I am Pituluk, with Oomgah his wife, also Pyak The Latecomer, also a third who may not yet be seen. We are all hungry."

"Whence come you?"

"From the bitter water driven by the storm."

The red-haired man made a gesture: it was a hundred miles north to the bitter water.

"Where are your dogs?"

"Their bellies being empty like ours, they left me."

At this, the man gave a shout, and was joined by some Indians, whom Pituluk instantly recognised as Dogribs, and in a short time the travellers were basking in warmth, and drinking something very hot. Then Oomgah went to sleep, with Pyak pulling

at her breast, but for Pituluk there was no sleep, so he just sat and watched the red-haired one who had busied himself over a box that his visitor knew to be a wireless set, with two wires running out of the tent to another longer one that stretched between two poles.

"Damn!" said Maclean in English, "this plug doesn't fit."

Pituluk's eyes narrowed, his pulse gave a little lift. "The hole is too small," he suggested softly, in his own tongue.

"That is truth, and I have nothing to make it larger."

Maclean felt impatient, for this was Christmas Eve.

"Then wait!" The hunter went out, unlashed the foot-drill, shook it free from snow, and brought it in with a small wooden box.

"I am a tooth doctor," he explained with dignity, "is not this almost the same thing?"

The red-haired one blinked at him, then burst into a gale of laughter, and finally fell silent as his guest fitted the small steel point, and put his foot on the pedal, when there commenced the soft, whirring sound he liked so much. In a few seconds the thing was done, and music such as he used to hear in Rachel's kitchen filled the tent. It came over the sea and across the Barrens, this time a song about a Child that had been born nearly two thousand years ago.

But not only these two, scientist and Husky, heard it. At McMurray it breathed into Scott's bungalow, where he and Mary were sitting by the fire, thinking, thinking, while James Scott junior was dipped in dimpled sleep close by: it sounded in Fort Resolution where Masters and his wife—she was now sound and well, were watching the child that nearly cost so dear: it was heard on Great Bear Lake and Old Fort Hearne, where the Coppermine loses itself in the Arctic Ocean: it came to Aklavik where Paula's head was resting on the shoulder of the man whose love she knew was hers.

And perhaps Rachel Bedell heard it too.





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